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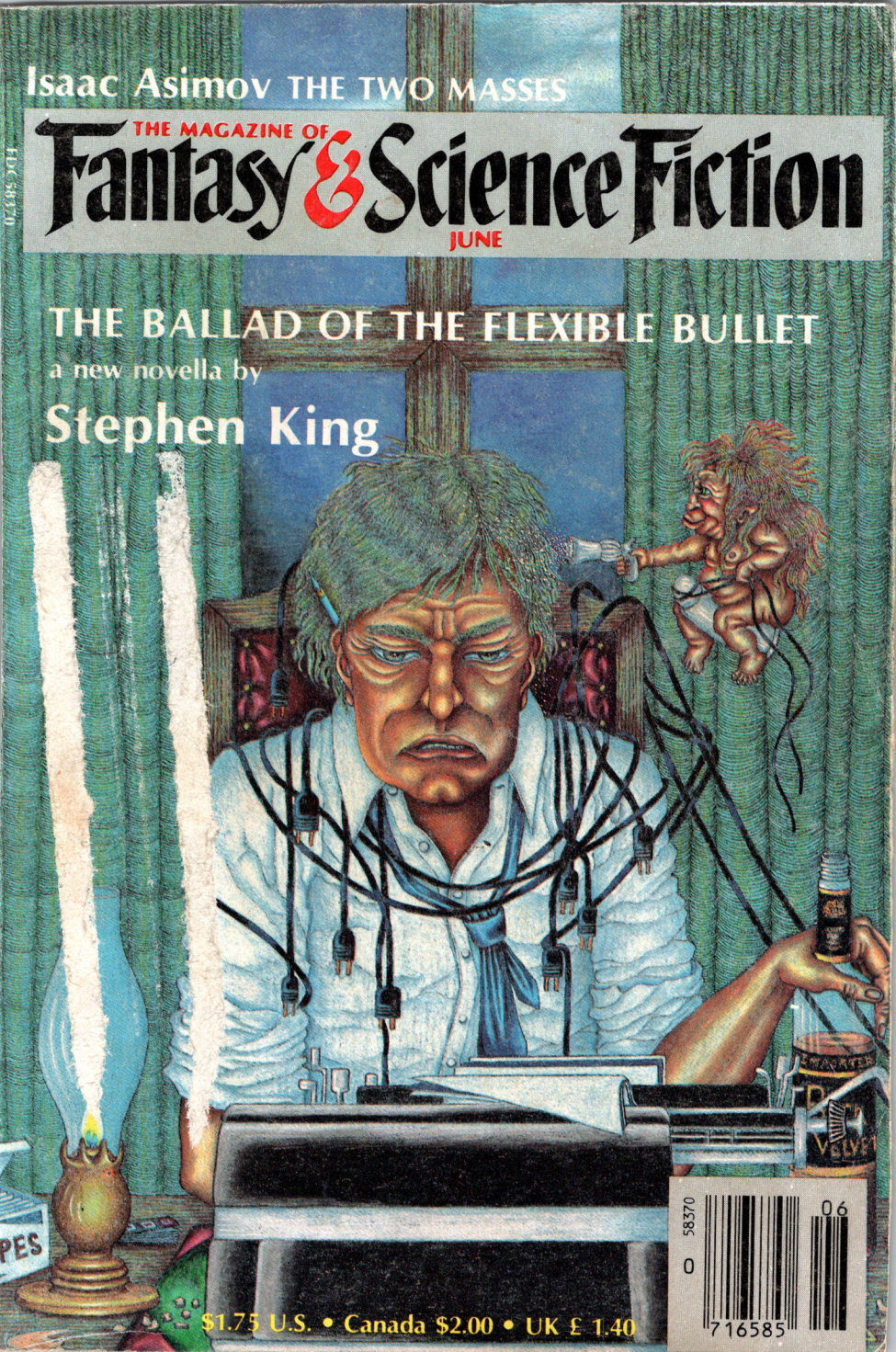

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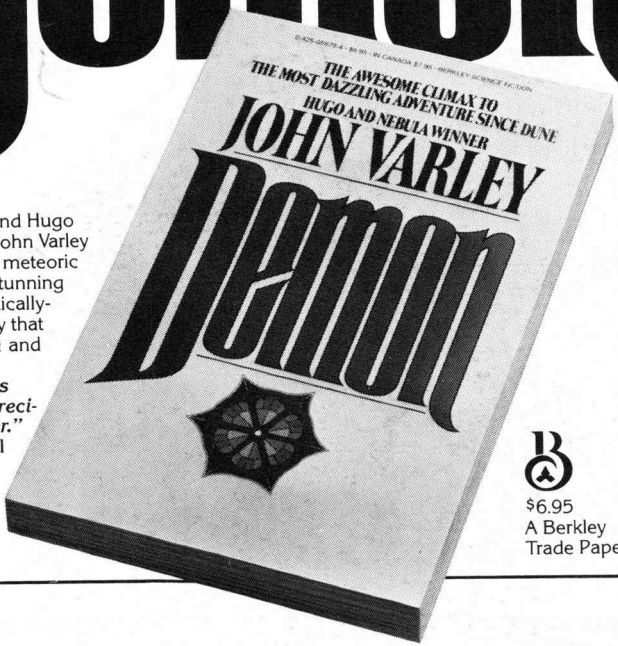

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As you all know by now, Stephen King has an uncanny ability to tell compelling stories about characters we all care about, and he seems to have turned the rare trick of becoming an immensely popular commercial novelist while at the same time earning the respect of most literary critics. His most recent book is PET SEMATARY, and he makes a welcome return to these pages with a fine tale about writing and madness.

The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet

BY **STEPHEN KING**

The barbecue was over. It had been a good one: drinks; charcoaled T-bones, rare; a green salad and Meg's special dressing. They had started at five. Now it was 8:30 and almost dusk — the time when a big party is just starting to get rowdy. But they weren't a big party. There were just the five of them: the agent and his wife; the celebrated young writer and *his* wife; and the magazine editor, who was in his early sixties and looked older. The editor stuck to Fresca. The agent had told the young writer before the editor arrived that there had once been a drinking problem there. It was gone now, and so was the editor's wife ... which was why they were five instead of six.

Instead of getting rowdy, an introspective mood fell over them as it started to get dark in the young writer's backyard, which fronted the lake. The young writer's first novel had been well reviewed and had sold a lot of copies. He was a lucky young man, and to his credit, he knew it.

The conversation had turned with playful gruesomeness from the young writer's early success to other writers who had made their marks early and had then committed suicide. Ross Lockridge was touched upon, and Tom Hagen. The agent's wife mentioned Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, and the young writer said that he didn't think Plath qualified as a *successful* writer. She had not committed suicide because of success, he said; she had gained success because she had committed suicide. The agent smiled.

"Please, couldn't we talk about something else?" the young writer's wife asked, a little nervously.

Ignoring her, the agent said, "And madness. There have been those who

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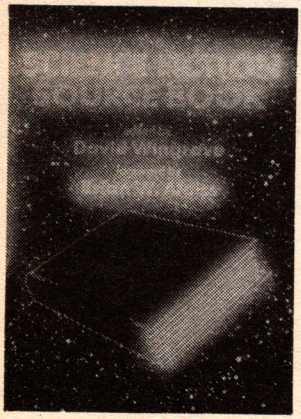

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have gone mad because of success." The agent had the mild but nonetheless rolling tones of an actor offstage.

The writer's wife was about to protest again — she knew that her husband liked to talk about these things only so he could joke about them, and he wanted to joke about them because he thought about them too much — when the magazine editor spoke up. What he said was so odd she forgot to protest.

"Madness is a flexible bullet."

The agent's wife looked startled. The young writer leaned forward quizzically. He said, "That sounds familiar—"

"Sure," the editor said. "That phrase, the image, 'flexible bullet' is Marianne Moore's. She used it to describe some car or other. I've always thought it described the condition of madness very well. Madness is a kind of mental suicide. Don't the doctors say now that the only way to truly measure death is by the death of the mind? Madness is a kind of flexible bullet to the brain."

The young writer's wife hopped up. "Anybody want another drink?"

She had no takers.

"Well, I do, if we're going to talk about this," she said, and went off to make herself one.

The editor said: "I had a story submitted to me once, when I was working over at *Logan's*. Of course it's gone the way of *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post* now, but we outlasted both of them." He said this with a trace of pride. "We published thirty-six short stories a year, or more, and every year four or five of them would be in somebody's collection of the year's best. And people *read* them. Anyway, the name of this story was 'The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,' and it was written by a man named Reg Thorpe. A young man about this young man's age, and about as successful."

"He wrote *Underworld Figures*, didn't he?" the agent's wife asked.

"Yes. Amazing track record for a first novel. Great reviews, lovely sales in hardcover and paperback, Literary Guild, everything. Even the movie was pretty good, although not as good as the book. Nowhere near."

"I loved that book," the author's wife said, lured back into the conversation against her better judgment. "Has he written anything since then? I read *Underworld Figures* back in college, and that was ... well, too long ago to think about."

"You haven't aged a day since then," the agent's wife said warmly, although privately she thought the young writer's wife was wearing a too-small halter and a too-tight pair of shorts.

"No, he hasn't written anything since then," the editor said. "Except for this one short story I was telling you about. He killed himself. Went crazy and killed himself."

"Oh," the young writer's wife said

limply. Back to *that*.

"Was the short story published?" the young writer asked.

"No, but not because the author went crazy and killed himself. It never got into print because the *editor* went crazy and *almost* killed himself."

The agent suddenly got up to freshen his own drink, which hardly needed freshening. He knew that the editor had had a nervous breakdown in the summer of 1969, not long before *Logan's* had drowned in a sea of red ink.

"I was the editor," the editor informed the rest of them. "In a sense we went crazy together, Reg Thorpe and I, even though I was in New York, he was out in Omaha, and we never even met. His book had been out about six months, and he had moved out there 'to get his head together,' as the phrase was them. And I happen to know this side of the story because I see his wife occasionally when she's in New York. She paints, and quite well. She's a lucky girl. He almost took her with him."

The agent came back and sat down. "I'm starting to remember some of this now," he said. "It wasn't just his wife, was it? He shot a couple of other people, one of them a kid."

"That's right," the editor said. "It was the kid that finally set him off."

"The *kid* set him off?" the agent's wife asked a little shrilly. "What do you mean?"

But the editor's face said he would not be drawn.

"I know my side of the story because I lived it," the magazine editor said. "I'm lucky, too. Damned lucky. It's an interesting thing about those who try to kill themselves by pointing a gun at their heads and pulling the trigger. You'd think it would be the foolproof method, better than pills or slashing the wrists, but it isn't. When you shoot yourself in the head, you just can't tell what's going to happen. The slug may ricochet off the skull and kill someone else. It may follow the skull's curve all the way around and come out on the other side. It may lodge in the brain and blind you and leave you alive. One man may shoot himself in the temple with a .38 and wake up in the hospital. Another may shoot himself in the forehead with a .22 and wake up in hell ... if there is such a place. I tend to believe it's here on earth, possibly in New Jersey."

The writer's wife laughed rather shrilly.

"The only foolproof suicide method is to step off a very high building, and that's so damned messy, isn't it?

"But my point is simply this: When you shoot yourself with a flexible bullet, you really don't know what the outcome is going to be. In my case, I went off a bridge and woke up on a trash-littered embankment with a trucker whapping me on the back and pumping my arms up and down like he had only twenty-four hours to get in shape and he had mistaken me for a

rowing machine. For Reg, the bullet was lethal. He .... but I'm telling you a story I have no idea if you want to hear."

He looked around at them questioningly in the gathering gloom. The agent and the agent's wife glanced at each other uncertainly, and the writer's wife was about to say she thought they'd had enough gloomy talk when her husband said, "I'd like to hear it. If you don't mind telling it for personal reasons, I mean."

"I never have told it," the editor said, "but not for personal reasons. Perhaps I never had the correct listeners."

"Then tell away," the writer said.

"Paul—" His wife put her hand on his shoulder. "Don't you think—"

"Not now, Meg."

The editor said:

"The story came in over the transom, and at that time *Logan's* no longer read unsolicited scripts. When they came in, a girl would just put them into return envelopes with a note that said 'Due to increasing costs and the increasing inability of the editorial staff to cope with a steadily increasing number of submissions, *Logan's* no longer reads unsolicited manuscripts. We wish you the best of luck in placing your work elsewhere.' Isn't that a lovely bunch of gobbledygook? It's not easy to use the word *increasing* three times in one sentence, but they did it."

"And if there was no return postage, the story went into the wastebasket," the writer said. "Right?"

"Oh, absolutely. No pity in the naked city."

An odd expression of unease flitted across the writer's face. It was the expression of a man who is in a tiger pit where dozens of better men have been clawed to pieces. So far this man hasn't seen a single tiger. But he has a feeling that they are there, and that their claws are still sharp.

"Anyway," the editor said, taking out his cigarette case, "this story came in, and the girl in the mailroom took it out, paper-clipped the form rejection to the first page, and was getting ready to put it in the return envelope when she glanced at the author's name. Well, she had read *Underworld Figures.* That fall everybody had read it, or was reading it, or was on the library waiting list, or checking the drugstore racks for the paperback."

The writer's wife, who had seen the momentary unease on her husband's face, took his hand. He smiled at her. The editor snapped a gold Ronson to his cigarette, and in the growing dark they could all see how haggard his face was — the loose, crocodile-skinned pouches under the eyes, the runneled cheeks, the old man's jut of chin emerging out of that late-middle-aged face like the prow of a ship. That ship, the writer thought, is called old age. No one particularly wants to cruise on it, but the staterooms are full. The gangholds, too, for that matter.

The lighter winked out, and the

editor puffed his cigarette meditatively.

"The girl in the mailroom who read that story and passed it on instead of sending it back is now a full editor at G. P. Putnam's Sons. Her name doesn't matter; what matters is that on the great graph of life, this girl's vector crossed Reg Thorpe's in the mailroom of *Logan's* magazine. Hers was going up, and his was going down. She sent the story to her boss, and her boss sent it to me. I read it and loved it. It was really too long, but I could see where he could pare five hundred words off it with no sweat. And that would be plenty."

"What was it about?" the writer asked.

"You shouldn't even have to ask," the editor said. "It fits so beautifully into the total context."

"About going crazy?"

"Yes, indeed. What's the first thing they teach you in your first college creative writing course? Write about what you know. Reg Thorpe knew about going crazy, because he was engaged in going there. The story probably appealed to me because I was also going there. Now you could say — if you were an editor — that the one thing the American reading public doesn't need foisted on them is another story about Going Mad Stylishly in America, subtopic A, Nobody Talks to Each Other Anymore. A popular theme in twentieth-century literature. All the greats have taken a hack at it, and all the hacks have taken an ax to it. But this story was funny. I mean, it was really hilarious.

"I haven't read anything like it before and I haven't since. The closest would be some of F. Scott Fitzgerald's stories ... and *Gatsby*. The fellow in Thorpe's story was going crazy, but he was doing it in a very funny way. You kept grinning, and there were a couple of places in this story — the place where the hero dumps the lime Jell-O on the fat girl's head is the best — where you laugh right out loud. But they're jittery laughs, you know. You laugh and then you want to look over your shoulder to see what heard you. The opposing lines of tension in that story were really extraordinary. The more you laughed, the more nervous you got. And the more nervous you got, the more you laughed ... right up to the point where the hero goes home from the party given in his honor and kills his wife and baby daughter."

"What's the plot?" the agent asked.

"No," the editor said, "that doesn't matter. It was just a story about a young man gradually losing his struggle to cope with success. It's better left vague. A detailed plot synopsis would only be boring. They always are.

"Anyway, I wrote him a letter. It said this: 'Dear Reg Thorpe, I've just read "The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet" and I think it's great. I'd like to publish it in *Logan's* early next year, if that fits. Does eight hundred dollars sound O.K.? Payment on acceptance. More or less.' New paragraph."

The editor indented the evening

air with his cigarette.

" 'The story runs a little long, and I'd like you to shorten it by about five hundred words, if you could. I would settle for a two-hundred-word cut, if it comes to that. We can always drop a cartoon.' Paragraph. 'Call, if you want.' My signature. And off the letter went, to Omaha."

"And you remember it, word for word like that?" the writer's wife asked.

"I kept all the correspondence in a special file," the editor said. "His letters, carbons of mine back. There was quite a stack of it by the end, including three or four pieces of correspondence from Jane Thorpe, his wife. I've read the file over quite often. No good, of course. Trying to understand the flexible bullet is like trying to understand how a Möbius strip can have only one side. That's just the way things are in this best of all possible worlds. Yes, I know it all word for word, or almost. Some people know the Declaration of Independence by heart."

"Bet he called you the next day," the agent said, grinning. "Collect."

"No, he didn't call. Shortly after *Underworld Figures*, Thorpe stopped using the telephone altogether. His wife told me that. When they moved to Omaha from New York, they didn't even have a phone put in the new house. He had decided, you see, that the telephone system didn't really run on electricity but on radium. He thought this was one of the two or three best-kept secrets in the history of the modern world. He claimed — to his wife — that all that radium was responsible for the growing cancer rate, not cigarettes or automobile emissions or industrial pollution. Each telephone had a small radium crystal in the handset, and every time you used the phone, you shot your head full of radiation."

"Yuh, he was crazy," the writer said. They all laughed.

"He wrote instead," the editor said, flicking his cigarette in the direction of the lake. His letter said this: 'Dear Henry Wilson (or just Henry, if I may), Your letter was both exciting and gratifying. My wife was, if anything, more pleased than I. The money is fine ... although in all honesty I must say that the idea of being published in *Logan's* at all seems like more than adequate compensation (but I'll take it, I'll take it). I've looked over your cuts, and they seem fine. I think they'll improve the story as well as clear space for those cartoons. All best wishes, Reg Thorpe.'

"Under his signature was a funny little drawing ... more like a doodle. An eye in a pyramid, like the one on the back of the dollar bill. But instead of *Novus Ordo Seclorum* on the banner beneath, there were these words: *Fornit Some Fornus.*"

"Either Latin or Groucho Marx," the agent's wife said.

"Just part of Reg Thorpe's growing eccentricity," the editor said. "His wife

told me that Reg had come to believe in 'little people,' sort of like elves or fairies. The Fornits. They were luck-elves, and he thought one of them lived in his typewriter."

"Oh, my Lord," the writer's wife said.

"According to Thorpe, each Fornit has a small device, like a flit-gun, full of ... good-luck dust, I guess you'd call it. And the good-luck dust—"

"—is called fornus," the writer finished. He was grinning broadly.

"Yes. And his wife thought it quite funny, too. At first. In fact, she thought at first — Thorpe had conceived the Fornits two years before, while he was drafting *Underworld Figures* — that it was just Reg, having her on. And maybe at first he was. It seems to have progressed from a whimsy to a superstition to an outright belief. It was ... a flexible fantasy. But hard in the end. Very hard."

They were all silent. The grins had faded.

"The Fornits had their funny side," the editor said. "Thorpe's typewriter started going to the shop a lot near the end of their stay in New York, and it was even a more frequent thing when they moved to Omaha. He had a loaner while it was being fixed for the first time out there. The dealership manager called a few days after Reg got his own machine back to tell him he was going to send a bill for cleaning the loaner as well as Thorpe's own machine."

"What was the trouble?" the agent's wife asked.

"I think I know," the writer's wife said.

"It was full of food," the editor said. "Tiny bits of cake and cookies. There was peanut butter smeared on the platens of the keys themselves. Reg was feeding the Fornit in his typewriter. He also 'fed' the loaner, on the off chance that the Fornit had made the switch."

"Boy," the writer said.

"I knew none of these things then, you understand. For the nonce, I wrote back to him and told him how pleased I was. My secretary typed the letter and brought it in for my signature, and then she had to go out for something. I signed it and she wasn't back. And then — for no real reason at all — I put the same doodle below my name. Pyramid. Eye. And *'Fornit Some Fornus.'* Crazy. The secretary saw it and asked me if I wanted it sent out that way. I shrugged and told her to go ahead.

"Two days later Jane Thorpe called me. She told me that my letter had excited Reg a great deal. Reg thought he had found a kindred soul ... someone else who knew about the Fornits. You see what a crazy situation it was getting to be? As far as I knew at that point, a Fornit could have been anything from a left-handed monkey wrench to a Polish steak knife. Ditto fornus. I explained to Jane that I had merely copied Reg's own design. She wanted to know why. I slipped the question, although the answer would

have been because I was very drunk when I signed the letter."

He paused, and an uncomfortable silence fell on the back lawn area. People looked at the sky, the lake, the trees, although they were no more interesting now than they had been a minute or two before.

"I had been drinking all my adult life, and it's impossible for me to say when it began to get out of control. In the professional sense I was on top of the bottle until nearly the very end. I would begin drinking at lunch and come back to the office *el blotto.* I functioned perfectly well there, however. It was the drinks after work — first on the train, then at home — that pushed me over the functional point.

"My wife and I had been having problems that were unrelated to the drinking, but the drinking made the other problems worse. For a long time she had been preparing to leave, and a week before the Reg Thorpe story came in, she did it.

"I was trying to deal with that when the Thorpe story came in. I was drinking too much. And to top it all off, I was having — well, I guess now it's fashionable to call it a mid-life crisis. All I knew at the time was that I was as depressed about my professional life as I was about my personal one. I was coming to grips — or trying to — with a growing feeling that editing mass-market stories that would end up being read by nervous dental patients, housewives at lunchtime, and an occasional bored college student was not exactly a noble occupation. I was coming to grips — again, trying to, all of us at *Logan's* were at that time — with the idea that in another six months, or ten, or fourteen, there might not be any *Logan's.*

"Into this dull autumnal landscape of middle-aged angst comes a very good story by a very good writer, a funny, energetic look at the mechanics of going crazy. It was like a bright ray of sun. I know it sounds strange to say that about a story that ends with the protagonist killing his wife and infant child, but you ask any editor what real joy is, and he'll tell you it's the great story or novel you didn't expect, landing on your desk like a big Christmas present. Look, you all know that Shirley Jackson story, 'The Lottery.' It ends on one of the most downbeat notes you can imagine. I mean, they take a nice lady out and stone her to death. Her son and daughter participate in her murder, for Christ's sake. But was that a piece of storytelling ... and I bet the editor at *The New Yorker* who read the story first went home that night whistling.

"What I'm trying to say is the Thorpe story was the best thing in my life right then. The one good thing. And from what his wife told me on the phone that day, my acceptance of that story was the one good thing that had happened to him lately. The author-editor relationship is always mutual parasitism, but in the case of Reg and

me, that parasitism was heightened to an unnatural degree."

"Let's go back to Jane Thorpe," the writer's wife said.

"Yes, I did sort of leave her on a side-track, didn't I? She was angry about the Fornit business. At first. I told her I had simply doodled that eye-and-pyramid symbol under my signature, with no knowledge of what it might be, and apologized for whatever I'd done.

"She got over her anger and spilled everything to me. She'd been getting more and more anxious, and she had no one to call at all to talk to. Her folks were dead, and all her friends were back in New York. Reg wouldn't allow anyone at all in the house. They were tax people, he said, or FBI, or CIA. Not long after they moved to Omaha, a little girl came to the door selling Girl Scout cookies. Reg yelled at her, told her to get the hell out, he knew why she was there, and so on. Jane tried to reason with him. She pointed out that the girl had only been ten years old. Reg told her that the tax people had no souls, no consciences. And besides, he said, the little girl might have been an android. Androids wouldn't be subject to the child labor laws. He wouldn't put it past the tax people to send an android Girl Scout full of radium crystals to find out if he was keeping any secrets ... and to shoot him full of cancer rays in the meantime."

"Good Lord," the agent's wife said.

"She'd been waiting for a friendly voice, and mine was the first. I got the Girl Scout story, I found out about the care and feeding of Fornits, about fornus, about how Reg refused to use a telephone. She was talking to me from a pay booth in a drugstore five blocks over. She told me that she was afraid it wasn't really tax men or FBI or CIA Reg was worried about. She thought he was really afraid that *They* — some hulking, anonymous group that hated Reg, was jealous of Reg, would stop at nothing to get Reg — had found out about his Fornit and wanted to kill it. If the Fornit was dead, there would be no more novels, no more short stories, nothing. You see? The essence of insanity. *They* were out to get him. In the end, not even the IRS, which had given him the very devil of a time over the income *Underworld Figures* generated. In the end it was just *They*. The perfect paranoid fantasy. *They* wanted to kill his Fornit."

"My God, what did you say to her?" the agent asked.

"I tried to reassure her," the editor said. "There I was, freshly returned from a five-martini lunch, talking to this terrified woman who was standing in a drugstore phone booth in Omaha, trying to tell her it was all right, not to worry that her husband believed that the phones were full of radium crystals, that a bunch of anonymous people were sending android Girl Scouts to get the goods on him, not to worry that her husband had disconnected his talent from his mentality to such a de-

gree that he could believe there was an elf living in his typewriter.

"I don't believe I was very convincing.

"She asked me — no, begged me — to work with Reg on his story, to see that it got published. She did everything but come out and say that 'The Flexible Bullet' was Reg's last contact to what we laughingly call reality.

"I asked her what I should do if Reg mentioned Fornits again. 'Humor him,' she said. Her exact words — humor him. And then she hung up.

"There was a letter in the mail from Reg the next day — five pages, typed, single-spaced. The first paragraph was about the story. The second draft was getting on well, he said. He thought he would be able to shave seven hundred words from the original ten thousand five hundred, bringing the final down to a tight nine thousand eight.

"The rest of the letter was about Fornits and fornus. His own observations, and questions ... dozens of questions."

"Observations?" The writer leaned forward. "He was actually seeing them, then?"

"No," the editor said. "Not seeing them in an actual sense, but in another way ... I suppose he was. You know, astronomers knew Pluto was there long before they had a telescope powerful enough to see it. They knew all about it by studying the planet Neptune's orbit. Reg was observing the Fornits in that way. They liked to eat at night, he said; had I noticed that? He fed them at all hours of the day, but he noticed that most of it disappeared after 8 P.M."

"Hallucination?" the writer asked.

"No," the editor said. "His wife simply cleared as much of the food out of the typewriter as she could when Reg went out for his evening walk, and he went out every evening at nine o'clock."

"I'd say she had quite a nerve getting after you," the agent grunted. He shifted his large bulk in the lawn chair. "She was feeding the man's fantasy herself."

"You don't understand why she called and why she was so upset," the editor said quietly. He looked at the writer's wife. "But I'll bet you do, Meg."

"Maybe," she said, and gave her husband an uncomfortable, sideways look. "She wasn't mad because you were feeding his fantasy. She was afraid you might upset it."

"Bravo." The editor lit a fresh cigarette. "And she removed the food for the same reason. If the food continued to accumulate in the typewriter, Reg would make the logical assumption, proceeding directly from his own decidedly illogical premise. Namely, that his Fornit had either died or left. Hence, no more fornus. Hence, no more writing. Hence...."

The editor let the word drift away on cigarette smoke and then resumed:

"He thought that Fornits were

probably nocturnal. They didn't like loud noises — he had noticed that he hadn't been able to write on mornings after noisy parties — they hated TV, they hated free electricity, they hated radium. Reg sold their TV set to Goodwill for twenty dollars, he said, and his wristwatch with the radium dial was long gone. Then the questions: How did I know about the Fornits? Was it possible that I had one in residence? If so, what did I think about this, this, and that? I don't need to be more specific, I think. If you've ever gotten a dog of a particular breed and can recollect the questions you asked about its care and feeding, you'll know most of the questions Reg asked me. One little doodle below my signature was all it took to open Pandora's box."

"What did you write back?" the agent asked.

The editor said slowly. "That's where the trouble really began. For both of us. Jane had said, 'Humor him,' so that's what I did. Unfortunately, I rather overdid it. I answered his letter at home, and I was very drunk. The apartment seemed much too empty. It had a stale smell — cigarette smoke, not enough airing. Things were going to seed with Sandra gone. The drop cloth on the couch all wrinkled. Dirty dishes in the sink, that sort of thing. The middle-aged man unprepared for domesticity.

"I sat there with a sheet of my personal stationery rolled into the typewriter and I thought: *I need a Fornit. In fact, I need a dozen of them to dust this damn lonely house with fornus from end to end.* In that instant I was drunk enough to envy Reg Thorpe his delusion.

"I said I had a Fornit, of course. I told Reg that mine was remarkably similar to his in its characteristics. Nocturnal. Hated loud noise, but seemed to enjoy Bach and Brahms ... I often did my best work after an evening of listening to them, I said. I had found that my Fornit had a decided taste for Kirschner's bologna ... had Reg ever tried it? I simply left little scraps of it near the Scripto I always carried — my editorial blue pencil, if you like — and it was almost always gone in the morning. Unless, as Reg said, it had been noisy the night before. I told him I was glad to know about radium, even though I didn't have a glow-in-the-dark wristwatch. I told him my Fornit had been with me since college. I got so carried away with my own invention that I wrote nearly six pages. At the end I added a paragraph about the story, a very perfunctory thing, and signed it."

"And below your signature—?" the agent's wife asked.

"Sure. *Fornit some Fornus.*" He paused. "You can't see it in the dark, but I'm blushing. I was so goddamned drunk, so goddamned *smug* ... I might have had second thoughts in the cold light of dawn, but by then it was too late."

"You'd mailed it the night before?" the writer murmured.

"So I did. And then, for a week and a half, I held my breath and waited. One day the manuscript came in, addressed to me, no covering letter. The cuts were as we had discussed them, and I thought that the story was letter perfect, but the manuscript was ... well, I put it in my briefcase, took it home, and retyped it myself. It was covered with weird yellow stains. I thought...."

"Urine?" the agent's wife asked.

"Yes, that's what I thought. But it wasn't. And when I got home, there was a letter in my mailbox from Reg. Ten pages this time. In the course of the letter the yellow stains were accounted for. He hadn't been able to find Kirschner's bologna, so had tried Jordan's.

"He said they loved it. Especially with mustard.

"I had been quite sober that day. But his letter, combined with those pitiful mustard stains ground right into the pages of his manuscript, sent me directly to the liquor cabinet. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars. Go directly to Drunk."

"What else did the letter say?" the agent's wife asked. She had grown more and more fascinated with the tale, and was now leaning over her not-inconsiderable belly in a posture that reminded the writer's wife of Snoopy standing on his doghouse and pretending to be a vulture.

"Only two lines about the story this time. All credit thrown to the Fornit ... and to me. The bologna had really been a fantastic idea. Rackne loved it, and a consequence—"

"Rackne?" the author asked.

"That was the Fornit's name," the editor said. "Rackne. As a consequence of the bologna, Rackne had really gotten behind in the rewrite. The rest of the letter was a paranoid chant. You have never seen such stuff in your life."

"Reg and Rackne ... a marriage made in heaven," the writer's wife said, and giggled nervously.

"Oh, not at all," the editor said. "Theirs was a working relationship. And Rackne was male."

"Well, tell us about the letter."

"That's one I don't have by heart. It's just as well for you that I don't. Even abnormality grows tiresome after a while. The mailman was CIA. The paperboy was FBI; Reg had seen a silenced revolver in his sack of papers. The people next door were spies of some sort; they had surveillance equipment in their van. He no longer dared to go down to the corner store for supplies because the proprietor was an android. He had suspected it before, he said, but now he was sure. He had seen the wires crisscrossing under the man's scalp, where he was beginning to go bald. And the radium count in his house was way up; at night he could see a dull, greenish glow in the rooms.

"His letter finished this way: 'I hope you'll write back and apprise me of your own situation (and that of your Fornit) as regards *enemies*, Henry. I

believe that reaching you has been an occurrence that transcends coincidence. I would call it a life ring — from (God? Providence? Fate? Supply your own term) — at the last possible instant.

" 'It is not possible for a man to stand alone for long against a thousand *enemies.* And to discover, at last, that one is *not* alone ... is it too much to say that the commonality of our experience stands between myself and total destruction? Perhaps not. I must know: Are the *enemies* after your Fornit as they are after Rackne? If so, how are you coping? If not, do you have any idea *why not?* I repeat, *I must know.*'

"The letter was signed with the *Fornit Some Fornus* doodle beneath, and then a P.S. Just one sentence. But lethal. The P.S. said: 'Sometimes I wonder about my wife.'

"I read the letter through three times. In the process, I killed an entire bottle of Black Velvet. I began to consider options on how to answer his letter. It was a cry for help from a drowning man — that was pretty obvious. The story had held him together for a while, but now the story was done. Now he was depending on me to hold him together. Which was perfectly reasonable, since I'd brought the whole thing on myself.

"I walked up and down the house, through all the empty rooms. And I started to unplug things. I was very drunk, remember, and heavy drinking opens unexpected avenues of suggestibility. Which is why editors and lawyers are willing to spring for three drinks before talking contract at lunch."

The agent brayed laughter, but the mood remained tight and tense and uncomfortable.

"And, please keep in mind that Reg Thorpe was one hell of a writer. He was absolutely convinced of the things he was saying. FBI. CIA. IRS. *They. The enemies.* Some writers possess a very rare gift for cooling their prose the more passionately they feel their subject. Steinbeck had it, so did Hemingway, and Reg Thorpe had that same talent. When you entered his world, everything began to seem very logical. You began to think it very likely, once you accepted the basic Fornit premise, that the paperboy *did* have a silenced .38 in his bag of papers. That the college kids next door with the van might indeed be KGB agents with death-capsules in wax molars, on a do-or-die mission to kill or capture Rackne.

"Of course, I didn't accept the basic premise. But it seemed so hard to think. And I unplugged things. First the color TV, because everybody knows that they really do give off radiation. At *Logan's* we had published an article by a perfectly reputable scientist suggesting that the radiation given off by the household color television was interrupting human brain waves just enough to alter them minutely but permanently. This scientist suggested that it might be the reason for declining col-

lege board scores, literacy tests, and grammar school development of arithmetical skills. After all, who sits closer to the TV than a little kid?

"So I unplugged the TV, and it really did seem to clarify my thoughts. In fact, it made it so much better that I unplugged the radio, the toaster, the washing machine, the dryer. Then I remembered the microwave oven, and I unplugged that. I felt a real sense of relief when that fucking thing's teeth were pulled. It was one of the early ones, about the size of a house, and it probably really *was* dangerous. Shielding on them's better these days.

"It occurred to me just how many things we have in any ordinary middle-class house that plug into the wall. An image occurred to me of this nasty electrical octopus, its tentacles consisting of electrical cables, all snaking into the walls, all connected with wires outside, and all wires leading to power stations run by the government.

"There was a curious doubling in my mind as I did those things," the editor went on, after pausing for a sip of his Fresca. "Essentially, I was responding to a superstitious impulse. There are plenty of people who won't walk under ladders or open a umbrella in the house. There are basketball players who cross themselves before taking foul shots, and baseball players who change their socks when they're in a slump. I think it's the rational mind playing a bad stereo accompaniment with the irrational subconscious. Forced to define 'irrational subconscious,' I would say that it is a small padded room inside all of us, where the only furnishing is a small card table, and the only thing on the card table is a revolver loaded with flexible bullets.

"When you change course on the sidewalk to avoid the ladder or step out of your apartment into the rain with your furled umbrella, part of your integrated self peels off and steps into that room and picks the gun up off the table. You may be aware of two conflicting thoughts: *Walking under a ladder is harmless,* and *Not walking under a ladder is also harmless.* But as soon as the ladder is behind you — or as soon as the umbrella is open — you're back together again."

The writer said, "That's very interesting. Take it a step further for me, if you don't mind. When does that irrational part actually stop fooling with the gun and put it up to its temple?"

The editor said, "When the person in question starts writing letters to the op-ed page of the paper demanding that all the ladders be taken down because walking under them is dangerous."

There was a laugh.

"Having taken it that far, I suppose we ought to finish. The irrational self has actually fired the flexible bullet into the brain when the person begins tearing around town, knocking ladders over and maybe injuring the people who were working on them. It is not certifiable behavior to walk around

ladders rather than under them. It is not certifiable behavior to write letters to the paper saying that New York City went broke because of all the people callously walking under workmen's ladders. But it is certifiable to start knocking over ladders."

"Because it's overt," the writer muttered.

The agent said, "You know, you've got something there, Henry. I've got this thing about not lighting three cigarettes on a match. I don't know how I got it, but I did. Then I read somewhere that it came from the trench warfare in World War I. It seems that the German sharpshooters would wait for the Tommies to start lighting each other's cigarettes. On the first light you got the range. On the second one you got the windage. And on the third one you blew the guy's head off. But knowing all that didn't make any difference. I still can't light three on a match. One part of me says it doesn't matter if I light a dozen cigarettes on one match. But the other part — this very ominous voice, like an interior Boris Karloff — says *'Ohhhh, if you doooo....'* "

"But all madness isn't superstitious, is it?" the writer's wife asked timidly.

"Isn't it?" the editor replied. "Jeanne d'Arc heard voices from heaven. Some people think they are possessed by demons. Others see gremlins ... or devils ... or Fornits. The terms we use for madness suggest superstition in some form or other. Mania ... abnormality ... irrationality ... lunacy ... insanity. For the mad person, reality has skewed. The whole person begins to reintegrate in that small room where the pistol is.

"But the rational part of me was still very much there. Bloody, bruised, indignant, and rather frightened, but still on the job. Saying: 'Oh, that's all right. Tomorrow when you sober up, you can plug everything back in, thank God. Play your games if you have to. But no more than this. No further than this.'

"That rational voice was right to be frightened. There's something in us that is very much attracted to madness. Everyone who looks off the edge of a tall building has felt at least a faint, morbid urge to jump. And anyone who has ever put a loaded pistol up to his head...."

"Ugh, don't," the writer's wife said. "Please."

"All right," the editor said. "My point is just this: Even the most well-adjusted person is holding onto his or her sanity by a greased rope. I really believe that. The rationality circuits are shoddily built into the human animal.

"With the plugs pulled, I went into my study, wrote Reg Thorpe a letter, put it in an envelope, stamped it, took it out, and mailed it. I don't actually remember doing any of these things. I was too drunk. But I deduce that I did them because when I got up the next morning, the carbon was still by my

typewriter, along with the stamps and the box of envelopes. The letter was about what you'd expect from a drunk. What is boiled down to was this: The enemies were drawn by electricity as well as by the Fornits themselves. Get rid of the electricity and you got rid of the enemies. At the bottom I had writing, 'the electricity is fucking up your thinking about these things, Reg. Interference with brain waves. Does your wife have a blender?' "

"In effect, you had started writing letters to the paper," the writer said.

"Yes. I wrote that letter on a Friday night. On Saturday morning I got up around eleven, hung over and only blurrily aware of what sort of mischief I'd been up to the night before. Great pangs of shame as I plugged everything back in. Greater pangs of shame — and fear — when I saw what I'd written to Reg. I looked all over the house for the original to that letter, hoping like hell I hadn't mailed it. But I had. And the way I got through the day was by making a resolution to take my lumps like a man and go on the wagon. Sure I was.

"The following Wednesday there was a letter from Reg. One page, handwritten. *Fornit Some Fornus* doodles all over it. In the center, just this: 'You were right. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Reg. You were right. Everything is fine now. Reg. Thanks a lot. Fornit is fine. Reg. Thanks. Reg.'"

"Oh, my," the writer's wife said.

"Bet his wife was mad," the agent's wife said.

"But she wasn't. Because it worked."

"Worked?" the agent said.

"He got my letter in the Monday morning post. Monday afternoon he went down to the local power company office and told them to cut his power off. Jane Thorpe, of course, was hysterical. Her range ran on electricity; she did indeed have a blender, a sewing machine, a washer-dryer combination ... well, you understand. On Monday evening I'm sure she was ready to have my head on a plate.

"But it was Reg's behavior that made her decide I was a miracle worker instead of a lunatic. He sat her down in the living room and talked to her quite rationally. He said that he knew he'd been acting in a peculiar fashion. He knew that she'd been worried. He told her that he felt much better with the power off, and that he would be glad to help her through any inconvenience that it caused. And then he suggested that they go next door and say hello."

"Not to the KGB agents with the radium in their van?" the writer asked.

"Yes, to them. Jane was totally floored. She agreed to go over with him, but she told me that she was girding herself up for a really nasty scene. Accusations, threats, hysteria. She had begun to consider leaving Reg if he wouldn't get help for his problem. She told me that Wednesday morning on

the phone that she had made herself a promise: the power was the next-to-the-last straw. One more thing, and she was going to leave for New York. She was becoming afraid, you see. The thing had worsened by such degrees as to be nearly imperceptible, and she loved him, but even for her, it had gotten as far as it could go. She had decided that if Reg said one strange word to the students next door, she was going to break up housekeeping. I found out much later that she had already asked some very circumspect questions about the procedure in Nebraska to effect an involuntary committal."

"The poor woman," the writer's wife murmured.

"But the evening was a smashing success," the editor said. "Reg was at his most charming ... and according to Jane, that was very charming indeed. She hadn't seen him so much on in three years. The sullenness, the secretiveness, they were gone. The nervous tics. The involuntary jump and look over his shoulder whenever a door opened. He had a beer and talked about all the topics that were current back in those dim, dead days: the war, the possibilities of a volunteer army, the riots in the cities, the pot laws.

"The fact that he had written *Underworld Figures* came up, and they were ... 'author struck' was the way Jane put it. Three of the four had read it, and you can bet the odd one wasn't going to linger any on his way to the library."

The writer laughed and nodded. He knew about that bit.

"So," the editor said, "we leave Reg Thorpe and his wife for just a little while, without electrical power but happier than they've been in a good long time—"

"Good thing he didn't have an IBM typewriter," the agent said.

"—and return to Ye Editor. Two weeks have gone by. Summer is ending. Ye Editor has, of course, fallen off the wagon any number of times, but has managed on the whole to remain pretty respectable. The days have gone their appointed rounds. At Cape Kennedy they are getting ready to put a man on the moon. The new issue of *Logan's*, with John Lindsay on the cover, is out on the stands, and selling miserably, as usual. I had put in a purchase order for a short story called 'The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,' by Reg Thorpe, first serial rights, proposed publication January 1970, proposed purchase price eight hundred dollars, which was standard then for a *Logan's* lead story.

"I got a buzz from my superior, Jim Dohegan. Could I come up and see him? I trotted into his office at ten in the morning, looking and feeling my very best. It didn't occur to me until later that Janey Morrison, his secretary, looked like a wake in progress.

"I sat down and asked Jim what I could do for him, or vise versa. I won't say the Reg Thorpe name hadn't entered my mind; having the story was a

tremendous coup for *Logan's*, and I suspected a few congratulations were in order. So you can imagine how dumbfounded I was when he slid two purchase orders across the desk at me. The Thorpe story, and a John Updike novella we had scheduled as the February fiction lead. RETURN stamped across both.

"I looked at the revoked purchase orders. I looked at Jimmy. I couldn't make any sense out of it. I really couldn't get my brains to work over what it meant. There was a block in there. I looked around and I saw his hotplate. Janey brought it in for him every morning when she came to work and plugged it in so he could have fresh coffee when he wanted it. That had been the drill at *Logan's* for three years or more. And that morning all I could think of was, *if that thing were unplugged, I could think. I know if that thing were unplugged, I could put this together.*

"I said, 'What is this, Jim?'

"'I'm sorry as hell to have to be the one to tell you this, Henry,' he said. '*Logan's* isn't going to be publishing any more fiction as of January 1970.'"

The editor paused to get a cigarette, but his pack was empty. "Does anyone have a cigarette?"

The writer's wife gave him a Salem.

"Thank you, Meg."

He lit it, shook out the match, and dragged deep. The coal glowed mellowly in the dark.

"Well," he said, "I'm sure Jim thought I was crazy. I said, 'Do you mind?' and leaned over and pulled the plug on his hotplate.

"His mouth dropped open and he said, 'What the hell, Henry?'

" 'It's hard for me to think with things like that going,' I said. 'Interference.' And it really seemed to be true, because with the plug pulled, I was able to see the situation a great deal more clearly. 'Does this mean I'm pinked?' I asked him.

" 'I don't know,' he said, 'That's up to Sam and the board. I just don't know, Henry.'

"There were a lot of things I could have said. I guess what Jimmy was expecting was a passionate plea for my job. You know that saying, 'he had his ass out to the wind?' ... I maintain that you don't understand the meaning of that phrase until you're the head of a suddenly nonexistent department.

"But I didn't plead my cause or the cause of fiction at *Logan's*. I pleaded for Reg Thorpe's story. First, I said that we could move it up over the deadline — put it in the December issue.

"Jimmy said, 'Come on, Henry, the December ish is locked up. You know that. And we're talking ten thousand words here.'

" 'Nine thousand eight,' I said.

" 'And a full-page illo,' he said. 'Forget it.'

" 'Well, we'll scrap the art,' I said. 'Listen, Jimmy, it's a great story, maybe the best fiction we've had in the last five years.'

"Jimmy said, 'I read it, Henry. I know it's a great story. But we just can't do it. Not in December. It's Christmas, for God's sake, and you want to put a story about a guy who kills his wife and kid under the Christmas trees of America? You must be—' He stopped right there, but I saw him glance over to his hotplate. He might as well have said it out loud, you know?"

The writer nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving the dark shadow that was the editor's face.

"I started to get a headache. A very small headache at first. It was getting hard to think again. I remembered that Janey Morrison had an electric pencil sharpener on her desk. There were all those fluorescents in Jim's office. The heaters. The vending machines in the concession down the hall. When you stopped to think of it, the whole fucking building ran on electricity; it was a wonder that anyone could get anything done. That was when the idea began to creep in, I think. The idea that *Logan's* was going broke because no one could think straight. And the reason no one could think straight was because we were all cooped up in this high-rise building that ran on electricity. Our brain waves were completely messed up. I remember thinking that if you could have gotten a doctor in there with one of those EEG machines, they'd get some awfully weird graphs. Full of those big, spiky alpha waves that characterize malignant tumors in the forebrain.

"Just thinking about those things made my headache worse. But I gave it one more try. I asked him if he would at least ask Sam Vadar, the editor in chief, to let the story stand in the January issue. As *Logan's* fiction valedictory, if necessay. The final *Logan's* story.

"Jimmy was fiddling with a pencil and nodding. He said, "I'll bring it up, but you know it's not going to fly. We've got a story by a one-shot novelist and we've got a story by John Updike that's just as good ... maybe better ... and—'

" '*The Updike story is not better!*' I said.

" 'Well, Jesus, Henry, you don't have to shout—'

" '*I am not shouting!*' I shouted.

"He looked at me for a long time. My headache was quite bad by then. I could hear the fluorescents buzzing away. They sounded like a bunch of flies caught in a bottle. It was a really hateful sound. And I thought I could hear Janey running her electrical pencil sharpener. *They're doing it on purpose,* I thought. *They want to mess me up. They know I can't think of the right things to say while those things are running, so ... so....*

"Jim was saying something about bringing it up at the next editorial meeting, suggesting that instead of an arbitrary cutoff date, they publish all the stories I had verbally contracted for ... although....

"I got up, went across the room,

and shut off the lights.

" 'What did you do that for?' Jimmy asked.

" 'You know why I did it,' I said. 'You ought to get out of here, Jimmy, before there's nothing left of you.'

"He got up and came over to me. 'I think you ought to take the rest of the day off, Henry,' he said. 'Go home. Rest. I know you've been under a strain lately. I want you to know I'll do the best I can on this. I feel as strongly as you do ... well, almost as strongly. But you ought to just go home and put your feet up and watch some TV.'

" 'TV,' I said, and laughed. It was the funniest thing I'd ever heard. 'Jimmy,' I said, 'you tell Sam Vadar something else for me.'

" 'What's that, Henry?'

" 'Tell him he needs a Fornit. This whole outfit. One Fornit? A dozen of them.'

" 'A Fornit,' he said, nodding. 'O.K., Henry. I'll be sure to tell him that.'

"My headache was very bad. I could hardly even see. Somewhere in the back of my mind I was already wondering how I was going to tell Reg and wondering how Reg was going to take it.

" 'I'll put in the purchase order myself, if I can find out whom to send it to,' I said. 'Reg might have some ideas. A dozen Fornits. Get them to dust this place with fornus from end to end. Shut off the fucking power, all of it.' I was walking around his office, and Jimmy was staring at me with his mouth open. 'Shut off all the power, Jimmy, you tell them that. Tell Sam that. No one can think with all that electrical interference, am I right?'

" 'You're right, Henry, 100 percent. You just go on home and get some rest. O.K.? Take a nap or something.'

" 'And Fornits. They don't like all that interference. Radium, electricity, it's all the same thing. Feed them bologna. Cake. Peanut butter. Can we get requisitions for that stuff?' My headache was this black ball of pain behind my eyes. I was seeing two of Jimmy, two of everything. All of a sudden I needed a drink. If there was no fornus — and the rational side of my mind assured me there was not — then a drink was the only thing in the world that would get me right.

" 'Sure, we can get the requisitions,' he said.

" 'You don't believe any of this, do you, Jimmy?' I asked.

" 'Sure I do. It's O.K. You just want to go home and rest a little while.'

" 'You don't believe it now,' I said, 'but maybe you will when this rag goes into bankruptcy. How in the name of God can you believe you're making rational decisions when you're sitting less than fifteen yards from a bunch of Coke machines and candy machines and sandwich machines?' Then I really had a terrible thought. *'And a microwave oven!'* I screamed at him. *'They got a microwave oven to heat the sandwiches up in!'*

"He started to say something, but I didn't pay any attention. I ran out. Thinking of that microwave oven explained everything. I had to get away from it. That was what made the headache so bad. I remember seeing Janey and Kate Younger from the ad department and Mert Strong from publicity in the outer office, all of them staring at me. They must have heard me shouting.

"My office was on the floor just below. I took the stairs. I went into my office, turned off all the lights, and got my briefcase. I took the elevator down to the lobby, but I put my briefcase between my feet and poked my fingers in my ears. I also remember the other three or four people in the elevator looking at me rather strangely." The editor uttered a dry chuckle. "They were scared. So to speak. Cooped up in a little moving box with an obvious madman, you would have been scared, too."

"Oh, surely, *that's* a little strong," the writer's wife said.

"Not at all. Madness has to start *somewhere.* If this story's *about* anything — if events in one's own life can ever be said to be *about* anything — then this is a story about the genesis of insanity. Madness has to start somewhere, and it has to go somewhere. Like a road. Or a bullet from the barrel of a gun. I was still miles behind Reg Thorpe, but I was over the line. You bet.

"I had to go somewhere, so I went to Four Fathers, a bar on 49th. I remember picking that bar specifically because there was no juke and no color TV and not many lights. I remember ordering the first drink. After that I don't remember anything until I woke up the next day in my bed at home. There was puke on the floor and a very large cigarette burn in the sheet over me. In my stupor I had apparently escaped dying in one of two extremely nasty ways — choking or burning. Not that I probably would have felt either."

"Jesus," the agent said, almost respectfully.

"It was a blackout," the editor said. "The first real bona fide blackout of my life — but they're alway a sign of the end, and you never have very many. One way or the other, you never have very many. But any alcoholic will tell you that a blackout isn't the same as *passing* out. It would save a lot of trouble if it were. No, when an alky blacks out, he keeps *doing* things. An alky in a blackout is a busy little devil. Sort of like a malign Fornit. He'll call up his ex-wife and abuse her over the phone, or drive his car the wrong way on the turnpike and wipe out a carload of kids. He'll quit his job, rob a market, give away his wedding ring. Busy little devils.

"What *I* had done, apparently, was to come home and write a letter. Only this one wasn't to Reg. It was to me. And *I* didn't write it — at least, according to the *letter,* I didn't."

"Who did?" the writer's wife asked.

"Bellis."

"Who's Bellis?"

"His Fornit," the writer said almost absently. His eyes were shadowy and far away.

"Yes, that's right," the editor said, not looking a bit surprised. He made the letter in the sweet night air for them again, indenting at the proper points with his finger.

" 'Hello from Bellis. I am sorry for your problems, my friend, but would like to point out at the start that you are not the only one with problems. This is no easy job for me. I can dust your damned machine with fornus from now unto forever, but moving the KEYS is supposed to be your job. That's what God made big people FOR. So I sympathize, but that's all the sympathy you get.

" 'I understand your worry about Reg Thorpe. I worry not about Thorpe but my brother, Rackne. Thorpe worries about what will happen to him if Rackne leaves, but only because he is selfish. The curse of serving writers is that they are *all* selfish. He worries not about what will happen to Rackne if THORPE leaves. Or goes *el bonzo seco*. Those things have apparently never crossed his oh-so-sensitive mind. But, luckily for us, all our unfortunate problems have the same short-term solution, and so I strain my arms and my tiny body to give it to you, my drunken friend. YOU may wonder about long-term solutions; I assure you there are none. All wounds are mortal. Take what's given. You sometimes get a little slack in the rope, but the rope always has an end. So what. Bless the slack and don't waste breath cursing the drop. A grateful heart knows that in the end we all swing.

"You must pay him for the story yourself. But not with a personal check. Thorpe's mental problems are severe and perhaps dangerous, but this in no way indicates stupiddity.' " The editor stopped here and spelled: *S-T-U-P-I-D-D-I-T-Y*. Then he went on. " 'If you give him a personal check, he'll crack wise in about nine seconds.

"Withdraw eight hundred and some few-odd dollars from your personal account and have your bank open a new account for you in the name of Arvin Publishing, Inc. Make sure they understand you want checks that look businesslike — nothing with cute dogs or canyon vistas on them. Find a friend, someone you can trust, and list him as co-drawer. When the checks arrive, make one for eight hundred dollars and have the co-drawer sign the check. Send the check to Reg Thorpe. That will cover your ass for the time being.

"Over and out.' It was signed 'Bellis,' Not in holograph. In type."

"Whew," the writer said again.

"When I got up the first thing I noticed was the typewriter. It looked like somebody had made it up as a ghost-typewriter in a cheap movie. The day before, it was an old black of-

fice Underwood. When I got up — with a head that felt about the size of North Dakota — it was a sort of gray. The last few sentences of the letter were clumped up and faded. I took one look and figured my faithful old Underwood was probably finished. I took a taste and went out into the kitchen. There was an open bag of confectioners' sugar on the counter with a scoop in it. There was confectioners' sugar everywhere between the kitchen and the little den where I did my work in those days."

"Feeding your Fornit," the writer said. "Bellis had a sweettooth. You thought so anyway."

"Yes. But even as sick and hungover as I was, I knew perfectly well who the Fornit was."

He ticked off the points on his fingers.

"First, Bellis was my mother's maiden name.

"Second, that phrase *el bonzo seco.* It was a private phrase my brother and I used to use to mean crazy. Back when we were kids.

"Third, and in a way most damning, was that spelling of the word *stupidity.* It's one of those words I habitually misspell. I had an almost screamingly literate writer once who used to spell *refrigerator* with a *d* — *refridgerator* — no matter how many times the copyeditors blooped it. And for this guy, who had a doctoral degree from Princeton, *ugly* was always going to be *ughly.*"

The writer's wife uttered a sudden laugh — it was both embarrassed and cheerful. "I do that."

"All I'm saying is that a man's misspellings — or a woman's — are his literary fingerprints. Ask any copyeditor who has done the same writer a few times.

"No, Bellis was I and I was Bellis. Yet the advice was damned good advice. In fact, I thought it was *great* advice. But here's something else — the subconscious leaves its fingerprints, but there's a stranger down there, too. A hell of a weird guy who knows a hell of a lot. I'd never seen that phrase *codrawer* in my life, to the best of my knowledge ... but there is was, and it was a good one, and I found out some time later that banks actually use it.

"I picked up the phone to call a friend of mine, and this bolt of pain — incredible! — went through my head. I thought of Reg Thorpe and his radium and put the phone down in a hurry. I went to see the friend in person after I'd taken a shower and gotten a shave and had checked myself about nine times in the mirror to make sure my appearance approximated how a rational human being is supposed to look. Even so, he asked me a lot of questions and looked me over pretty closely. So I guess there must have been a few signs that a shower, a shave, and a good dose of Listerine couldn't hide. He wasn't in the biz, and that was a help. News has a way of traveling, you know. In the biz. So to

speak. Also, if he'd been in the biz, he would have known Arvin Publishing, Inc. was responsible for *Logan's* and would have wondered just what sort of scam I was trying to pull. But he wasn't, he didn't, and I was able to tell him it was a self-publishing venture I was interested in since *Logan's* had apparently decided to deep-six the fiction department."

"Did he ask you why you were calling it Arvin Publishing?" the writer asked.

"Yes."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him," the editor said, smiling a wintry smile, "that Arvin was my mother's maiden name."

There was a little pause, and then the editor resumed; he spoke almost uninterrupted to the end.

"So I began waiting for the printed checks, of which I wanted exactly one. I exercised to pass the time. You know — pick up the glass, flex the elbow, empty the glass, flex the elbow again. Until all the exercise wears you out and you just sort of fall forward with your head on the table. Other things happened, but those were the ones that really occupied my mind — the waiting and the flexing. As I remember. I have to reiterate that, because I was drunk a lot of the time, and for every single thing I remember, there are probably fifty or sixty I don't.

"I quit my job — that caused a sigh of relief all around, I'm sure. From them because they didn't have to perform the existential task of firing me for craziness from a department that was no longer in existence; from me because I didn't think I could ever face that building again — the elevator, the fluorescents, the phones, the thought of all that waiting electricity.

"I wrote Reg Thorpe and his wife a couple of letters each during that three-week period. I remember doing hers, but not his — like the letter from Bellis. I wrote those letters in blackout periods. But I hewed to my old work-habits when I was blotto, just as I hewed to my old misspellings. I never failed to use a carbon ... and when I came to the next morning, the carbons were lying around. It was like reading letters from a stranger.

"Not that the letters were crazy. Not at all. The one where I finished up with the P.S. about the blender was a lot worse. These letters seemed ... almost reasonable."

He stopped and shook his head, slowly and wearily.

"Poor Jane Thorpe. Not that things *appeared* to be all that bad at their end. It must have seemed to her that her husband's editor was doing a very skillfull — and humane — job of humoring him out of his deepening depression. The question of whether or not it's a good idea to humor a person who has been entertaining all sorts of paranoid fantasies — fantasies that almost led in one case to an actual assault on a little girl — probably occurred to her; if so, she chose to ignore

the negative aspects, because she was humoring him, too. Nor have I ever blamed her for it — he wasn't just a meal ticket, some nag that was to be worked and humored, humored and worked until he was ready for the rendering plant; she loved the guy. In her own special way, Jane Thorpe was a great lady. And after living with Reg from the Early Times to the High Times and finally to the Crazy Times, I think she would have agreed with Bellis about blessing the slack and not wasting your breath cursing the drop. Of course, the more slack you get, the harder the snap when you finally fetch up at the end ... but even that quick snap can be a blessing, I reckon — who wants to strangle?

"I had return letters from both of them in that short period — remarkably sunny letters ... although there was a strange, almost final quality to that sunlight. It seemed as if ... well, never mind the cheap philosophy. If I can think of what I mean, I'll say it. Let it go for now.

"He was playing hearts with the kids next door every night, and by the time the leaves started to fall, they thought Reg Thorpe was just about God come down to earth. When they weren't playing cards or tossing a Frisbee, they were talking literature, with Reg gently rallying them through their paces. He'd gotten a puppy from the local animal shelter and walked it every morning and night, meeting other people on the block the way you do when you walk your mutt. People who'd decided the Thorpes were really very peculiar people now began to change their minds. When Jane suggested that without electrical appliances, she could really use a little house help, Reg agreed at once. She was flabbergasted by his cheery acceptance of the idea. It wasn't a question of money — after *Underworld Figures* they were rolling in dough — it was a question, Jane figured, of *they*. *They* were everywhere, that was Reg's scripture, and what better agent for *they* than a cleaning woman that went everywhere in your house, looked under beds and in closets and probably in desk drawers as well, if they weren't locked and then nailed shut for good measure.

"But he told her to go right ahead, told her he felt like an insensitive clod not to've thought of it earlier, even though — she made a point of telling me this — he was doing most of the heavy chores, such as handwashing, himself. He made only one small request: that the woman not be allowed to come into his study.

"Best of all, most encouraging of all from Jane's standpoint, was the fact that Reg had gone back to work, this time on a new novel. She had read the first three chapters and thought they were marvelous. All of this, she said, had begun when I had accepted 'The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet' for *Logan's* — the period before that had been dead low ebb. And she blessed me for it.

"I am sure she really meant that last, but her blessing seemed to have no great warmth, and the sunniness of her letter was marred somehow — here we are, back to *that*. The sunshine in her letter was like sunshine on a day when you see those mackerel-scale clouds that mean it's going to rain like hell soon.

"All this good news — hearts and dog and cleaning woman and new novel — and she was too intelligent to really believe he was getting well again ... or so I believed, even in my own fog. Reg had been exhibiting symptoms of psychosis. Psychosis is like lung cancer in one way — neither one of them clears up on its own, although both cancer patients and lunatics may have their good days.

"May I borrow another cigarette, dear?"

The writer's wife gave him one.

"After all," he resumed, bringing out the Ronson, "the signs of his *idée fixe* were all around her. No phone; no electricity. He'd put Reynolds Wrap over all the switch plates. He was putting food in his typewriter as regularly as he put it into the new puppy's dish. The students next door thought he was a great guy, but the students next door didn't see Reg putting on rubber gloves to pick up the newspaper off the front stoop in the morning because of his radiation fears. They didn't hear him moaning in his sleep, or have to soothe him when he woke up screaming with dreadful nightmares he couldn't remember.

"You, my dear" — he turned toward the writer's wife — "have been wondering why she stuck with him. Although you haven't said as much, it's been on your mind. Am I right?"

She nodded.

"Yes. And I'm not going to offer a long motivational thesis — the convenient thing about stories that are true is that you need only say *this is what happened* and let people worry for themselves about why. Generally, nobody ever knows why things happen anyway ... particularly the ones who say they do.

"But in terms of Jane Thorpe's own selective perception, things *had* gotten one hell of a lot better. She interviewed a middle-aged black woman about the cleaning job, and brought herself to speak as frankly as she could about her husband's idiosyncracies. The woman, Gertrude Rulin by name, laughed and said she'd done for people who were a whole lot stranger. Jane spent the first week of the Rulin woman's employ pretty much the way she'd spent that first visit with the young people next door — waiting for some crazy outburst. But Reg charmed Gertrude as completely as he'd charmed the kids, talking to her about her church work, her husband, and her youngest son, Jimmy, who according to Gertrude, made Dennis the Menace look like the biggest bore in the first grade. She'd had eleven children in all, but there was a nine-year gap between Jimmy and his next oldest sib. He made

things hard on her.

"Reg seemed to be getting well ... at least, if you looked at things a certain way, he did. But he was just as crazy as ever, of course, and so was I. Madness may well be a sort of flexible bullet, but any ballistics expert worth his salt will tell you no two bullets are exactly the same. Reg's one letter to me talked a little bit about his new novel, and then passed directly to Fornits. Fornits in general, Rackne in particular. He speculated on whether *they* actually wanted to kill Fornits, or — he thought this more likely — capture them alive and study them. He closed by saying, 'both my appetite and my outlook on life have improved immeasurably since we began our correspondence, Henry. Appreciate it all. Affectionately yours, Reg.' And a P.S. below, inquiring casually if an illustrator had been assigned to do his story. That caused a guilty pang or two and a quick trip to the liquor cabinet on my part.

"Reg was into Fornits; I was into wires.

"My answering letter mentioned Fornits only in passing — by then I really *was* humoring the man, at least on that subject; an elf with my mother's maiden name and my own bad spelling habits didn't interest me a whole hell of a lot.

"What had come to interest me more and more was the subject of electricity, and microwaves, and RF waves, and RF interference from small appliances, and low-level radiation, and Christ knows what else. I went to the library and took out books on the subject; I bought books on the subject. There was a lot of scary stuff in them ... and of course that was just the sort of stuff I was looking for.

"I had my phone taken out and my electricity turned off. It helped for a while, but one night when I was staggering in the door drunk with a bottle of Black Velvet in my hand and another one in my topcoat pocket, I saw this little red eye peeping down at me from the ceiling. God, for a minute I thought I was going to have a heart attack. It looked like a bug up there at first ... a great big dark bug with one glowing eye.

"I had a Coleman gas lantern and I lit it. Saw what it was at once. Only instead of relieving me, it made me feel worse. As soon as I got a good look at it, it seemed I could feel large, clear bursts of pain going through my head — like radio waves. For a moment it was as if my eyes had rotated in their sockets and I could look into my own brain and see cells in there smoking, going black, dying. It was a smoke detector — a gadget that was even newer than microwave ovens back in 1969.

"I bolted out of the apartment and went downstairs — I was on the fifth floor, but by then I was always taking the stairs — and hammered on the super's door. I told him I wanted that thing out of there, wanted it out of there *right away*, wanted it out of there *tonight*, wanted it out of there *within*

the hour. He looked at me as though I had gone completely — you should pardon the expression — bonzo seco, and I can understand that now. That smoke detector was supposed to make me feel *good*, it was supposed to make me *safe*. Now, of course, they're the law, but back then it was a Great Leap Forward, paid for by the building tenants' association.

"He removed it — it didn't take long — but the look in his eyes was not lost upon me, and I could, in some limited way, understand his feelings. I needed a shave, I stank of whiskey, my hair was sticking up all over my head, my topcoat was dirty. He would know I no longer went to work; that I'd had my television taken away; that my phone and electrical service had been voluntarily interrupted. He thought I was crazy.

"I may have been crazy, but — like Reg — I was not stupid. I turned on the charm. Editors have got to have a certain amount, you know. And I greased the skids with a ten-dollar bill. Finally, I was able to smooth things over, but I knew from the way people were looking at me in the next couple of weeks — my last two weeks in the building, as things turned out — that the story had traveled. The fact that no member of the tenants' association approached me to make wounded noises about my ingratitude was particularly telling. I suppose they thought I might take after them with a steak knife.

"All of that was very secondary in my thoughts that evening, however. I sat in the glow of the Coleman lantern, the only light in the three rooms except for all the electricity in Manhattan that came through the windows. I sat with a bottle in one hand, a cigarette in the other, looking at the plate in the ceiling where the smoke detector with its single red eye — an eye that was so unobtrusive in the daytime that I had never even noticed it — had been. I thought of the undeniable fact that, although I'd had all the electricity turned off in my place, there had been that one live item ... and where there was one, there might be more.

"Even if there wasn't, the whole building was rotten with wires — it was filled with wires the way a man dying of cancer is filled with evil cells and rotting organs. Closing my eyes, I could see all those wires in the darkness of their conduits, glowing with a sort of green nether light. And beyond them, the entire city. One wire, almost harmless in itself, running to a switch plate ... the wire behind the switch plate a little thicker, leading down through a conduit to the basement, where it joined a still thicker wire ... that one leading down under the street to a whole *bundle* of wires, only those wires so thick that they were really cables.

"When I got Jane Thorpe's letter mentioning the tinfoil, part of my mind recognized that she saw it as a sign of Reg's craziness, and that part knew I would have to respond as if my

whole mind thought she was right. The other part of my mind — by far the larger part now — thought: 'What a marvelous idea!' And I covered my own switch plate in identical fashion the very next day. I was the man, remember, that was supposed to be helping Reg Thorpe. In a desperate sort of way, it's actually quite funny.

"I determined that night to leave Manhattan. There was an old family place in the Adirondacks I could go to, and that sounded fine to me. The one thing keeping me in the city was Reg Thorpe's story. If 'The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet' was Reg's life ring in a sea of madness, it was mine, too — I wanted to place it in a good magazine. With that done, I could get the hell out.

"So that's where the not-so-famous Wilson-Thorpe correspondence stood just before the shit hit the fan. We were like a couple of dying drug addicts comparing the relative merits of heroin and 'ludes. Reg had Fornits in his typewriter, I had Fornits in the walls, and both of us had Fornits in our heads.

"And there was *they*. Don't forget *they*. I hadn't been flogging the story around for long before deciding *they* included every magazine fiction editor in New York — not that there were many by the fall of 1969. If you'd grouped them together, you could have killed the whole bunch of them with one shotgun shell, and before long I started to feel that was a damned good idea.

"It took about five years before I could see it from their perspective. I'd upset the super, and he was just a guy who saw me when the heat screwed up and when it was time for his Christmas tip. These other guys ... well, the irony was just that a lot of them really *were* my friends. Jared Baker was the assistant fiction editor at *Esquire* in those days, and Jared and I had been in the same rifle company during World War II, for instance. These guys weren't just uneasy after sampling the new improved Henry Wilson. They were appalled. If I'd just sent the story around with a pleasant covering letter explaining the situation — my version of it, anyway — I probably would have sold the Thorpe story almost right away. But oh, no, that wasn't good enough. Not for this story. I was going to see that this story got the *personal treatment*. So I went from door to door with it, a stinking, grizzled ex-editor with shaking hands and red eyes and a big old bruise on his left cheekbone from where he had run into the bathroom door on the way to the can in the dark two nights before. I might as well have been wearing a sign reading BELLVUE BOUND.

Nor did I want to talk to these guys in their offices. In fact, I could not. The time had long since passed when I could get into an elevator and ride it up forty floors. So I met them like pushers meet junkies — in parks, on steps, or in the case of Jared Baker, in a Burger Heaven on 49th Street. Jared at least

would have been delighted to buy me a decent meal, but the time had passed, you understand, when any self-respecting maître d' would have let me in a restaurant where they serve businesspeople.

The agent winced.

"I got perfunctory promises to read the story, followed by concerned questions about how I was, how much I was drinking. I remember — hazily — trying to tell a couple of them about how electricity and radiation leaks were fucking up everyone's thinking, and when Andy Rivers, who edited fiction for *American Crossings*, suggested I ought to get some help, I told him *he* was the one who ought to get some help.

" 'You see those people out there on the street?' I said. We were standing in Washington Square Park. 'Half of them, maybe even three-quarters of them, have got brain tumors. I wouldn't sell you Thorpe's story on a bet, Andy. Hell, you couldn't understand it in this city. Your brain's in the electric chair, and you don't even know it.'

"I had a copy of the story in my hand, rolled up like a newspaper. I whacked him on the nose with it, the way you'd whack a dog for piddling in the corner. Then I walked off. I remember him yelling for me to come back, something about having a cup of coffee and talking it over some more, and then I passed a discount record store with loudspeakers blasting heavy metal onto the sidewalk and banks of snowy-cold fluorescent lights inside, and I lost his voice in a kind of deep buzzing sound inside my head. I remember thinking two things — I had to get out of the city soon, very soon, or I would be nursing a brain tumor of my own, and I had to get a drink right away.

"That night when I got back to my apartment, I found a note under the door. It said, *'We want you out of here, you crazy-bird.'* I threw it away without so much as a second thought. We veteran crazy-birds have more important things to worry about than anonymous notes from fellow tenants.

"I was thinking over what I'd said to Andy Rivers about Reg's story. The more I thought about it — and the more drinks I had — the more sense it made. 'Flexible Bullet' was funny, and on the surface it was easy to follow ... but below that surface level it was surprisingly complex. Did I really think another editor in the city could grasp the story on all levels? Maybe once, but did I still think so now that my eyes had been opened? Did I really think there was room for appreciation and understanding in a place that was wired up like a terrorist's bomb? God, loose volts were leaking out everywhere.

"I read the paper while there was still enough daylight to do so, trying to forget the whole wretched business for a while, and there on page one of the *Times* was a story about how radio-

active material from nuclear power plants kept disappearing — the article went on to theorize that enough of that stuff in the right hands could quite easily be used to make a very dirty nuclear weapon.

"I sat there at the kitchen table as the sun went down, and in my mind's eye I could see *them* panning for plutonium dust like 1849 miners panning for gold. Only *they* didn't want to blow up the city with it, oh, no. *They* just wanted to sprinkle it around and fuck up everyone's minds. They were the bad Fornits, and all that radioactive dust was bad-luck fornus. The worst bad-luck fornus of all time.

"I decided I didn't want to sell Reg's story after all — at least, not in New York. I'd get out of the city just as soon as the checks I'd ordered arrived. When I was upstate, I could start sending it around to the out-of-town literary magazines. *Sewanee Review* would be a good place to start, I reckoned, or maybe *Iowa Review*. I could explain to Reg later. Reg would understand. That seemed to solve the whole problem, so I took a drink to celebrate. And then the drink took a drink. And then the drink took the man. So to speak. I blacked out. I had only one more blackout left in me, as it happened.

"The next day my Arvin Publishing checks came. I typed one of them up and went to see my friend, the 'co-drawer.' There was another one of those tiresome cross-examinations, but this time I kept my temper. I wanted that signature. Finally, I got it. I went to a business supply store and had them make up a Arvin Publishing letter-stamp while I waited. I stamped a return address on a business envelope, typed Reg's address (the confectioners' sugar was out of my machine, but the keys still had a tendency to stick), and added a brief personal note, saying that no check to an author had ever given me more personal pleasure ... and that was true. Still is. It was almost an hour before I could bring myself to mail it — I just couldn't get over how *official* it looked. You never would have known that a smelly drunk who hadn't changed his underwear in days had put *that* one together."

He paused, crushed out his cigarette, looked at his watch. Then, oddly like a conductor announcing a train's arrival in some city of importance, he said, "We have reached the inexplicable.

"This is the point in my story that most interested the two psychiatrists and various mental caseworkers with whom I was associated over the next thirty months of my life. It was the only part of it they really wanted me to recant, as a sign that I was getting well again. As one of them put it, 'This is the only part of your story that cannot be exposed as no more than faulty induction ... once, that is, your sense of logic has been mended.' Finally, I *did* recant, because I knew — even if they didn't — that I *was* getting well, and I was damned anxious to get out of the

sanatorium. I thought if I didn't get out fairly soon, I'd go crazy all over again. So I recanted — Galileo did, too, when they held his feet to the fire — but I have never recanted in my own mind. I don't say that what I'm about to tell you really happened; I say only that I still *believe* it happened. That's a small qualification, but to me it's crucial.

"So, my friends, the inexplicable:

"I spent the next two days preparing to move upstate. The idea of driving the car didn't disturb me at all, by the way, I had read as a kid that the inside of a car is one of the safest places to be during an electrical storm, because the rubber tires serve as near-perfect insulators. I was actually looking forward to getting in my old Chevrolet, cranking up all the windows, and driving out of the city, which I had begun to see as a sink of lightning. Nevertheless, part of my preparations included removing the bulb in the dome light, and taping over the socket, turning the headlight knob all the way to the left to kill the dash lights, and cutting the radio cable.

"When I came in on the last night I meant to spend in the apartment, the place was empty except for the kitchen table, the bed, and my typewriter in the den. The typewriter was sitting on the floor. I had no intentions of taking it with me — it had too many bad associations, and besides, the key were going to stick forever. Let the next tenant have it, I thought — it, and Bellis, too.

"It was just sunset, and the place was a funny color. I was pretty drunk, and I had another bottle in my topcoat pocket against the watches of the night. I started across the den, meaning to go into the bedroom, I suppose. There I would sit on the bed and think about wires and electricity and free radiation and drink until I was drunk enough to go to sleep.

"What I called the den was really the living room. I made it my workplace because it had the nicest light in the whole apartment — a big westward-facing window that looked all the way to the horizon. That's something close to the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes in a fifth-floor Manhattan apartment, but the line of sight was there. I didn't question it; I just enjoyed it. That room was filled with a clear, lovely light even on rainy days.

"But the quality of the light that evening was eerie. The sunset had filled the room with a red glow. Furnace light. Empty, the room seemed too big. My heels made flat echoes on the hardwood floor.

"The typewriter sat in the middle of the floor, and I was just going around it when I saw there was a ragged scrap of paper stuck under the roller — that gave me a start, because I knew there had been no paper in the machine when I went out for the last time to get the fresh bottle.

"I looked around, wondering if there was someone — some intruder — in the place with me. Except it wasn't

really intruders, or burglars, or junkies, I was thinking of ... it was ghosts.

"I saw a ragged blank place on the wall to the left of the bedroom door. I at least understood where the paper in the typewriter had come from. Someone had simply torn off a ragged piece of the old wallpaper.

"I was still looking at this when I heard a single small clear noise — *clack!* — from behind me. I jumped and whirled around with my heart knocking in my throat. I was terrified, but I knew what that sound was just the same — there was no question at all. You work with words all your life and you know the sound of a typewriter platen hitting paper, even in a deserted room at dusk, where there is no one to strike the key."

They looked at him in the dark, their faces blurred white circles, saying nothing, slightly huddled together now. The writer's wife was holding one of the writer's hand tightly in both of her own.

"I felt ... outside myself. Unreal. Perhaps this is always the way one feels when one arrives at the point of the inexplicable. I walked slowly over to the typewriter. My heart was pounding madly up there in my throat, but I felt mentally calm ... icy, even.

"*Clack!* Another platen popped up. I saw it this time — the key was in the third row from the top, on the left.

"I got down on my knees very slowly, and then all the muscles in my legs seemed to go slack, and I half-swooned the rest of the way down until I was sitting there in front of the typewriter with my dirty London Fog topcoat spread around me like the skirt of a girl who has made her very deepest curtsy. The typewriter clacked twice more, fast, paused, then clacked again. Each *clack* made the same kind of flat echo my footfalls had made on the floor.

"The wallpaper had been rolled into the machine so that the side with the dried glue on it was facing out. The letters were ripply and bumpy, but I could read them, *rackn*, it said. Then it clacked again and the word was *rackne*.

"Then—" He cleared his throat and grinned a little. "Even all these years later this is hard to tell ... to just say right out. O.K. The simple fact, with no icing on it, is this. I saw a hand come out of the typewriter. An incredibly tiny hand. It came out from between the keys *B* and *N* in the bottom row, curled itself into a fist, and hammered down on the spacer bar. The machine jumped a space — very fast, like a hiccup — and the hand drew back down inside."

The agent's wife giggled shrilly.

"Can it, Marsha," the agent said softly, and she did.

"The clacks began to come a little faster," the editor went on, "and after a while I fancied I could hear the creature that was shoving the key arms up gasping, the way anyone will gasp when he is working hard, closer and

closer to his physical limit. After a while the machine was hardly printing at all, and most of the keys were filled with that old gluey stuff, but I could read the impressions. It got out *rackne is d* and then the *y* key stuck to the glue. I looked at it for a moment, and then I reached out one finger and freed it. I don't know if it — Bellis — could have freed it himself. I think not. But I didn't want to see it ... him ... try. Just the fist was enough to have me tottering on the brink. If I saw the elf entire, so to speak, I think I really would have gone crazy. And there was no question of getting up to run. All the strength had gone out of my legs.

"*Clack-clack-clack*, those tiny grunts and sobs of effort, and after every word that pallid ink- and dirt-streaked fist would come out between the *B* and the *N* and hammer down on the space bar. I don't know exactly how long it went on. Seven minutes, maybe. Maybe ten. Or maybe forever.

"Finally, the clacks stopped, and I realized I couldn't hear him breathing anymore. Maybe he had fainted ... maybe he had just given up and gone away ... or maybe he had died. Had a heart attack or something. All I really know for sure is that the message was not finished. It read, completely in lower case: *rackne is dying its the little boy jimmy thorpe doesn't know tell thorpe rackne is dying the little boy jimmy is killing rackne bel* ... and that was all.

"I found the strength to get to my feet then, and I left the room. I walked in great big tippy-toe steps, as if I thought it had gone to sleep and if I made any of those flat echoey noises on the bare wood, it would wake up and the typing would start again ... and I thought if it did, the first *clack* would start me screaming. And then I would just go on until my heart or my head burst.

"My Chevvy was in the parking lot down the street, all gassed and loaded and ready to go. I got in behind the wheel and remembered the bottle in my topcoat pocket. My hands were shaking so badly that I dropped it, but it landed on the seat and didn't break.

"I remembered the blackouts, and my friends, right then a blackout was exactly what I wanted, and exactly what I got. I remember taking the first drink from the neck of the bottle, and the second. I remember turning over the accessory and getting Frank Sinatra on the radio singing 'That Old Black Magic,' which seemed fitting enough. Under the circumstances. So to speak. I remember singing along, and having a few more drinks. I was in the back row of the lot, and I could see the traffic light on the corner going through its paces. I kept thinking of those flat clacking sounds in the empty room, and the fading red light in the den. I kept thinking of those puffing sounds, as if some body-building elf had hung fishing sinkers on the ends of a Q-Tip and was doing bench presses inside my old typewriter. I kept seeing the pebbly

surface on the back side of that torn scrap of wallpaper. My mind kept wanting to examine what must have gone on before I came back to the apartment ... kept wanting to see it — him — Bellis — jumping up, grabbing the loose edge of the wallpaper by the door to the bedroom because it was the only thing left in the room approximating paper — hanging on — finally tearing it loose and carrying it back to the typewriter on its — on *his* — head like the leaf of a nipa palm. I kept trying to imagine how he — it — could ever have run it into the typewriter. And none of that was blacking out, so I kept drinking and Frank Sinatra stopped and there was an ad for Crazy Eddie's and then Sarah Vaughn came on singing 'I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter' — and that was something *else* I could relate to since I'd done just that recently, or at least I'd *thought* I had up until tonight when something happened to give me cause to rethink my position on that matter, so to speak — and I sang along with good old Sarah Soul, and right about then I must have achieved escape velocity because in the middle of the second chorus with no lag at all I was puking my guts out while somebody first thumped my back with his palms and then lifted my elbows behind me and put them down and then thumped my back with his palms again. That was the trucker. Every time he thumped I'd feel a great clot of liquid rise up in my throat and get ready to go back down except then he'd lift my elbows, and every time he lifted my elbows I'd puke again, and most of it wasn't even Black Velvet but river water. When I was able to lift my head enough to look around, it was six o'clock in the evening three days later and I was lying on the bank of the Jackson River in western Pennsylvania, about sixty miles north of Pittsburgh. My Chevvy was sticking out of the river, rear end up. I could still read the McCarthy sticker on the bumper.

"Is there another Fresca, love? My throat's dry as hell."

The writer's wife fetched him one silently, and when she handed it to him, she impulsively bent and kissed his wrinkled, alligator-hide cheek. He smiled, and his eyes sparkled in the dim light. She was, however, a good and kindly woman, and the sparkle did not in any way fool her. It was merriness that made eyes sparkle that way.

"Thank you, Meg."

He drank deeply, coughed, waved away the offer of a cigarette.

"I've had enough of those for the evening. I'm going to quit them entirely. In my next incarnation. So to speak.

"The rest of my own tale really needs no telling. It would have against it the only sin that any tale can ever really be guilty of — it's predictable. They fished something like forty bottles of Black Velvet out of my car, a good many of them empty. I was babbling about elves, and electricity, and

Fornits, and plutonium miners, and fornus, and I seemed utterly insane to them, and that of course is exactly what I was.

"Now here's what happened in Omaha while I was driving around — according to the gas credit slips in the Chevvy's glove compartment — five northeastern states. All of this, you understand, was information I obtained from Jane Thorpe over a long and painful period of correspondence, which culminated in a face-to-face meeting in New Haven, where she now lives, shortly after I was dismissed from the sanatorium as a reward for finally recanting. At the end of that meeting we wept in each other's arms, and that was when I began to believe that there could be a real life for me — perhaps even happiness — again.

"That day, around three o'clock in the afternoon, there was a knock at the door of the Thorpe home. It was a telegraph boy. The telegram was from me — the last item of our unfortunate correspondence. It read: REG HAVE INFORMATION THAT RACKNE IS DYING IT'S THE LITTLE BOY ACCORDING TO BELLIS BELLIS SAYS THE BOY'S NAME IS JIMMY FORNIT SOME FORNUS HENRY.

"In case that marvelous Howard Baker question of *What did he know and when did he know it* has gone through your mind, I can tell you that I knew Jane had hired a cleaning woman; I didn't know — except through Bellis — that she had a l'il devil son named Jimmy. I suppose you'll have to take my word for that, although in all fairness I have to add that the shrinks who worked on my case over the next two and a half years never did.

"When the telegram came, Jane was at the grocery store. She found it after Reg was dead, in one of his back pockets. The time of transmission and delivery were both noted on it, along with the added line *No telephone/Deliver original.* Jane said that although the telegram was only a day old, it had been so much handled that it looked as if he'd had it for a month.

"In a way, that telegram, those twenty-six words, was the real flexible bullet, and I fired it directly into Reg Thorpe's brain all the way from Patterson, New Jersey, and I was so fucking drunk I don't even remember doing it.

"During the last two weeks of his life, Reg had fallen into a pattern that seemed normality itself. He got up at six, made breakfast for himself and his wife, then wrote for an hour. Around eight o'clock he would lock his study and take the dog for a long, leisurely walk around the neighborhood. He was very forthcoming on these walks, stopping to chat with anyone who wanted to chat with him, tying the pooch outside a nearby café to have a midmorning cup of coffee, then rambling on again. He rarely got back to the house before noon. On many days it was twelve-thirty or one o'clock. Part of this was an effort to escape the garrulous Gertrude Rulin, Jane be-

lieved, because his pattern hadn't really begun to solidify until a couple of days after she started working for them.

"He would eat a light lunch, lie down for an hour or so, then get up and write for two or three hours. In the evenings he would sometimes go next door to visit with the young people, either with Jane or alone; sometimes he and Jane took in a movie, or just sat in the living room and read. They turned in early, Reg usually awhile before Jane. She wrote there was very little sex, and what there was of it was unsuccessful for both of them. 'But sex isn't as important for most women,' she said, 'and Reg was working full-out again, and that was a reasonable substitute for him. I would say that, under the circumstances, those last two weeks were the happiest in the last five years.' I damn near cried when I read that.

"I didn't know anything about Jimmy, but Reg did. Reg knew everything except for the most important fact — that Jimmy had started coming to work with his mother.

"How furious he must have been when he got my telegram and began to realize! Here *they* were, after all. And apparently his own wife was one of *them*, because *she* was in the house when Gertrude and Jimmy were there, and she had never said a thing to Reg about Jimmy. What was it he had written to me in that earliest letter? 'Sometimes I wonder about my wife.'

"When she arrived home on the day the telegram came, she found Reg gone. There was a note on the kitchen table that said: 'Love — I've gone down to the bookstore. Back by suppertime.' This seemed perfectly fine to Jane ... but if Jane had known about my telegram, the very normality of that note would have scared the hell out of her. I think. She would have understood that Reg believed she had changed sides.

"Reg didn't go near any bookstore. He went to Littlejohn's Gun Emporium downtown. He bought a .45 automatic and two thousand rounds of ammunition. He would have bought an AK-70 if Littlejohn's had been allowed to sell them. He meant to protect his Fornit, you see. From Jimmy, from Gertrude, from Jane. From *them*.

"Everything went according to established routine the next morning. She remembered thinking he was wearing an awfully heavy sweater for such a warm fall day, but that was all. The sweater, of course, was because of the gun. He went out to walk the dog with the .45 stuffed into the waistband of his chinos.

"Except the restaurant where he usually got his morning coffee was as far as he went, and he went directly there, with no lingering or conversation along the way. He took the pup around to the loading area, tied its leash to a railing, and then went back toward his house by way of backyards.

"He knew the schedule of the young people next door very well; knew they would all be out. He knew where they kept their spare key. He let himself in, went upstairs, and watched his own house.

"At eight-forty he saw Gertrude Rulin arrive. And Gertrude wasn't alone. There was indeed a small boy with her. Jimmy Rulin's boisterous first-grade behavior convinced the teacher and the school guidance counselor almost at once that everyone (except maybe Jimmy's mother, who could have used a rest from Jimmy) would be better off if he waited another year. Jimmy was stuck with repeating kindergarten, and he had afternoon sessions for the first half of the year. The two day-care centers in her area were full, and she couldn't change to afternoons for the Thorpe's because she had another cleaning job on the other side of town from two to four.

"The upshot of everything was Jane's reluctant agreement that Gertrude could bring Jimmy with her until she was able to make other arrangements. Or until Reg found out, as he was sure to do.

"She thought Reg *might* not mind — he had been so sweetly reasonable about everything lately. On the other hand, he might have a fit. If that happened, other arrangements would *have* to be made. Gertrude said she understood. And for heaven's sake, Jane added, the boy was not to touch any of Reg's things. Gertrude said for sure not; the mister's study door was locked and would stay locked.

"Thorpe must have crossed between the two yards like a sniper crossing no-man's-land. He saw Gertrude and Jane washing bed linen in the kitchen. He didn't see the boy. He moved along the side of the house. No one in the dining room. No one in the bedroom. And then, in the study, where Reg had morbidly expected to see him, there Jimmy was. The kid's face was hot with excitement, and Reg surely must have believed that here was a bona fide agent of *them* at last.

"The boy was holding some sort of death ray in his hand, it was pointed at the desk ... and from inside his typewriter, Reg could hear Rackne screaming.

"You may think I'm attributing subjective data to a man who's not dead — or, to be more blunt, making stuff up. But I'm not. In the kitchen both Jane and Gertrude heard the distinctive warbling sounds of Jimmy's plastic space blaster ... he'd been shooting it around the house ever since he started coming with his mother, and Jane hoped daily that its batteries would go dead. There was no mistaking the sound. No mistaking the place it was coming from, either — Reg's study.

"The kid really *was* Dennis the Menace material, you know — if there was a room in the house he wasn't supposed to go, that was the one place he *had* to go, or die of curiosity. It didn't

take him long to discover that Jane kept a key to Reg's study on the dining room mantel, either. Had he been in there before? I think so. Jane said she remembered giving the boy an orange three or four days before, and later, when she was clearing out the house, she found orange peels under the little studio sofa in that room. Reg didn't eat oranges — claimed he was allergic to them.

"Jane dropped the sheet she was washing back into the sink and rushed into the bedroom. She heard the loud *wah-wah-wah* of the space blaster, and she heard Jimmy, yelling: *'I'll getcha! You can't run! I can seeya through the GLASS!'* And ... she said ... she said that she heard something screaming. A high, despairing sound, she said, so full of pain it was almost insupportable.

" 'When I heard that,' she said, 'I knew that I would have to leave Reg no matter *what* happened, because all the old wives' tales were true ... madness was catching. Because it was Rackne I was hearing; somehow that rotten little kid was shooting Rackne, killing it with a two-dollar space gun from Kresge's.

" 'The study door was standing open, the key in it. Later on that day I saw one of the dining room chairs standing by the mantel, with Jimmy's sneaker prints all over the seat. He was bent over Reg's typewriter table. He — Reg — had an old office model with glass inserts in the sides. Jimmy had the muzzle of his blaster pressed against one of those and was shooting it into the typewriter. *Wah-wah-wah-wah,* was purple pulses of light shooting out of the typewriter, and suddenly I could understand everything Reg had ever said about electricity, because although that thing ran on nothing more than harmless old C or D cells, it really did feel as if there were waves of poison coming out of that gun and rolling through my head and frying my brains.

" ' *"I seeya in there!"* Jimmy was screaming, and his face was filled with a small boy's glee — it was both beautiful and somehow gruesome. *"You can't run away from Captain Future! You're dead, alien!"* And that screaming ... getting weaker ... smaller....

" ' *"Jimmy, you stop it!"* I yelled.

" 'He jumped. I'd startled him. He turned around ... looked at me ... stuck out his tongue ... and then pushed the blaster against the glass panel and started shooting again. *Wah-wah-wah,* and that rotten purple light.

" 'Gertrude was coming down the hall, yelling for him to stop, to get out of there, that he was going to get the whipping of his life ... and then the front door burst open and Reg came up the hall, bellowing. I got one good look at him and understood that he was insane. The gun was in his hand.

" ' *"Don't you shoot my baby!"* Gertrude screamed when she saw him, and reached out to grapple with him. Reg simply clubbed her aside.

" 'Jimmy didn't even seem to realize any of this was going on — he just went on shooting the space blaster into the typewriter. I could see that purple light pulsing in the blackness between the keys, and it looked like one of those electrical arcs they tell you not to look at without a pair of special goggles because otherwise it might boil your retinas and make you blind.

" 'Reg came in, shoving past me, knocking me over.

" '*RACKNE!*" he screamed. "*YOU'RE KILLING RACKNE.*"

" 'And even as Reg was rushing across the room, apparently planning to kill that child,' Jane told me, 'I had time to wonder just how many times he *had* been in that room, shooting that gun into the typewriter when his mother and I were maybe upstairs changing beds or in the backyard hanging clothes where we couldn't hear the *wah-wah-wah* ... where we couldn't hear that thing ... the Fornit ... inside, screaming.

" 'Jimmy didn't stop even when Reg came bursting in — just kept shooting into the typewriter as if he knew it was his last chance, and since then I have wondered if perhaps Reg wasn't right about *they*, too — only maybe *they* just sort of float around, and every now and then *they* dive into a person's head like someone doing a double-gainer into a swimming pool, and *they* get that somebody to do the dirty work and then check out again, and the guy *they* were in says, "Huh? Me? Did *what?*"

" 'And in the second before Reg got there, the screaming from inside the typewriter turned into a brief, drilling shriek — and I saw blood splatter all over the inside of that glass insert, as if whatever was in there had finally just exploded, the way they say a live animal will explode if you put it in a microwave oven. I know how crazy it sounds, but I *saw* that blood — it hit the glass in a blot and then started to run.

" ' "Got it," Jimmy said, highly satisfied. "Got—"

" 'Then Reg threw him all the way across the room. He hit the wall. The gun was jarred out of his hand, hit the floor, and broke. It was nothing but plastic and Eveready batteries, of course.

" 'Reg looked into the typewriter, and he screamed. Not a scream of pain or fury, although there was fury in it — mostly it was a scream of grief. He turned toward the boy then. Jimmy had fallen to the floor, and whatever he *had* been — if he ever *was* anything more than just a mischievous little boy — now he was just a six-year-old in terror. Reg pointed the gun at him, and that's all I remember.' "

The editor finished his soda and put the can carefully aside.

"Gertrude Rulin and Jimmy Rulin remember enough to make up for the lack," he said. "Jane called out, 'Reg, *No!*' and when he looked around at her, she got to her feet and grappled with him. He shot her, shattering her

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left elbow, but she didn't let go. As she continued to grapple with him, Gertrude called to her son, and Jimmy ran to her.

"Reg pushed Jane away and shot her again. This bullet tore along the left side of her skull. Even an eighth of an inch to the right and he would have killed her. There is little doubt of that, and none at all that, if not for Jane Thorpe's intervention, he would have surely killed Jimmy Rulin and quite possibly the boy's mother as well.

"He *did* shoot the boy — as Jimmy ran into his mother's arms just outside the door. The bullet entered Jimmy's left buttock on a downward course. It exited from his left thigh, missing the bone, and passed through Gertrude Rulin's shin. There was a lot of blood, but no major damage done to either.

"Gertrude slammed the study door and carried her screaming bleeding son down the hallway and out the front door." The editor paused again, thoughtfully.

"Jane was either unconscious by that time or she has deliberately chosen to forget what happened next. Reg sat down in his office chair and put the muzzle of the .45 against the center of his forehead. He pulled the trigger. The bullet did not pass through his brain and leave him a living vegetable, nor did it travel in a semicirlce around his skull and exit harmlessly on the far side. The fantasy was flexible, but the final bullet was as hard as it could be. He fell forward across the typewriter, dead.

"When the police broke in, they found him that way; Jane was sitting in a far corner, semiconscious.

"The typewriter was covered with blood, presumably filled with blood as well; head wounds are very, very messy.

"All of the blood was Type O.

"Reg Thorpe's type.

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, is my story; I can tell no more." Indeed, the editor's voice had been reduced to little more than a husky whisper.

There was none of the usual post-party chatter, or even the awkwardly bright conversation people sometimes use to cover a cocktail party indiscretion, or to at least disguise the fact that things had at some point become much more serious than a dinner-party situation usually warranted.

But as the writer saw the editor to his car, he was unable to forbear one final question. "The story," he said. "What happened to the story?"

"You mean Reg's—"

" 'The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet,' that's right. The story that caused it all. *That* was the real flexible bullet — for you, if not for him. What in the hell happened to this story that was so goddam great?"

The editor opened the door of his car; it was a small blue Chevette with a sticker on the back bumper that read FRIENDS DON'T LET FRIENDS DRIVE DRUNK. "No, it was never published. If Reg had a carbon copy, he destroyed it following my receipt and acceptance of the tale — considering his paranoid feelings about *they*, that would have been very much in character.

"I had his original plus three photocopies with me when I went into the Jackson River. All four in a cardboard carton. If I'd put that carton in the trunk, I would have the story now, because the rear end of my car never went under — even if it had, the pages could have been dried out. But I wanted it close to me, so I put it in the front, on the driver's side. The windows were open when I went into the water. The pages ... I assume they just floated away and were carried out to sea. I'd rather believe that than believe they rotted along with the rest of the trash at the bottom of that river, or were eaten by catfish, or something even less aesthetically pleasing. To believe they were carried out to sea is more romantic, and slightly more unlikely, but in matters of what I choose to believe, I find I can still be flexible.

"So to speak."

The editor got into his small car and drove away. The writer stood and watched until the taillights had winked out, and then turned around. Meg was there standing in the darkness, smiling a little tentatively at him. Her arms were crossed tightly across her bosom, although the night was warm.

"We're the last two," she said. "Want to go in?"

"Sure."

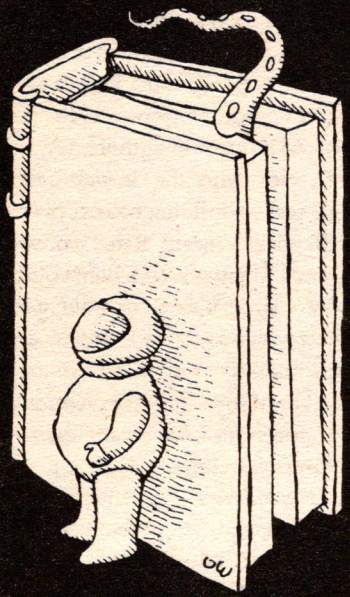
Halfway up the walk she stopped and said: "There are no Fornits in your typewriter, are there, Paul?"

And the writer, who had sometimes — often — wondered exactly where the words *did* come from, said bravely: "Absolutely not."

They went inside arm in arm and closed the door against the night.

Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

Survey of Modern Fantasy Literature, Frank N. Magill, Editor. Salem Press, $250.00

"I Have Seen the Future, and It Irks", from *Another Part of The Fifties*, Paul A. Carter. Columbia University Press, $19.95

Dark Valley Destiny, The Life of Robert E. Howard, L. Sprague de Camp, Catherine Crook de Camp, Jane Whittington Griffin. Bluejay Books, $16.95

Nebula Award Stories Seventeen, Joe Haldeman, ed. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, $16.95

Frank Magill has done it again. The five-volume *Survey of Modern Fantasy Literature* is the perfect complement to his earlier *Survey of Science Fiction Literature.*

(The price of the latter has gone up, by the way; it nows lists for $225, but is $180 if purchased in combination with *Modern Fantasy* at $250. Catalog cards come with both; a "Librarian's Guide" comes with the *Fantasy* set.)

I will grant you not many of you out there are feverishly tearing leaves out of your checkbooks and searching high and low for an envelope and stamp. But perhaps you can put the arm on your library. In my experience sitting here month after month with things to look up, there is no resource like the *Science Fiction* set, and the new one gets off on the right foot in the first place by recognizing that there is such a form as modern fantasy, distinct in its own right. There are many quarters in which that will be news.

Editor Magill begins with a preface in which he explains how he and his advisors and researchers came to create this set and not some other set. And in the fifth volume, half the wordage is taken up by a series of essays on various aspects of fantasy and various interpretations of those aspects. In the middle between those ends we get generally thoughtful and always substantial essays on 500 specific works by 341 authors who, quoting Magill, "have contributed to the development of the genre to its present high level of artistry." Altogether what we have here is a survey amounting to a college education on its topic ... an education which, unlike any previous treatment of fantasy on anything approximating this level of ambition, pays as much or more attention to Piers Anthony and Roger Zelazny, for just two, as it does to the classical "greats" whose chief claim to relevance now is their presence in public domain anthologies we were offered in grade school.

There are problems, of course, in differentiating between science fiction and fantasy, especially modern fantasy; one symptom is evidenced by the presence of an essay on *Frankenstein* in both sets. The set of essays may be another; a reflection of a growing awareness — among those who haven't been keeping up with the Budrys view of the matter — that suddenly nobody knows what fantasy is, except what thing you're pointing to when you say the word. But I'm not here today to present my concepts once again; furthermore, they might even be questionable in some way, so rather than muddy the waters with clarifications now, I think it more useful to point out that simply reading through these five volumes from start to finish, you will have gotten a pretty good statistic on what's being voted fantasy by a rather well qualified board of expert appraisers.

The authors covered actually range from Edwin A. Abbott (with *Flatland*[!]) to Jack Zipes, and the books from John Erskine's *Adam and Eve* to Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson.* Not all of them are novels; some are anthologies, and others are series treated as units — for instance, Zelazny's *Amber* books. Then, like the *Science Fiction* survey, this one includes a far-ranging extra section on the short works of influential authors. (A. Langley Searles helps the *Survey* pass the Biggle test with flying colors; his essay on Stephen Vincent Benét convinced me, and I fancy myself a Benét buff; ipso facto, since it's a good source in an area on which I qualify to judge, all the words in all five volumes have my approval until such time as exceptions begin to creep into my awareness.)

Approval comes a little more substantially backed, too, when I cast my eye down the list of consultants — Donald L. Lawlor, Robert Reginald, Roger C. Schlobin, and Gary K. Wolfe, to name those whose work I know and respect, plus G. Richard

Thompson, with whom I'm not familiar, and Brian Stableford. That's to my mind a remarkably high percentage of people who have been seen with their sleeves rolled up and their brains in gear at the same time, and the proportion is at least duplicated among the long list of critical writers.

There's always room to quibble at compendia of this sort. What is collected here is, after all, a set of opinions, granted most of them are supported by documentation and by self-evident clarity of thought. But what with Magill's prefactory statement, and then the background essays, the extensive supporting bibliographical references — one presumes Schlobin's hand in that — and other auxiliaries to usefulness, the set is as bulletproof as possible and furthermore offers pointers to those who would seek out their own opinion. What has been made here is a landmark, and I rather imagine it will still be operating in aid of scholarship long after the literary community has redefined "modern." I am really, truly, impressed by the contributors' effort and by Salem's, and were I ever to wear a hat I would doff it to Magill for his management of what must have been a wainful of paper and, at times, a plethora of postulants.

Paul A. Carter has published, I guess, about a dozen SF stories — at least one here in the January, 1956 issue — over the years since the middle 1940s. He is by trade an historian, however, the author of such works as *Little America: Town at the End of the World*, and — memorably in SF terms — *The Creation of Tomorrow: Fifty Years of Magazine Science Fiction*, published in 1977 by Columbia University Press and addressed to the world at large.

Carter's kind of history apparently tends to overlap with contemporary sociology. The book he's most known for is *Another Part of the Twenties*, a thesis which in some quarters was greeted as a long overdue re-examination of the milieu most people think was inhabited entirely by gangsters, flappers and Elliot Ness.

One of these days, when I'm doing a survey of my reference library, we'll get to my no doubt breathlessly awaited remarks on *The Creation of Tomorrow*. Meanwhile, Carter has published *Another Part of the Fifties*, delving into the Eisenhower Era (which was also the beginning of the era in which any number of statesmen prominent then and since rose in the public esteem by detecting various sorts of subversive threats to Democracy). That is to say, it delves into what might very well have been even more of a McCarthy Era than it was, had the good senator been any less inclined to let his booze frame his strategies.

In a chapter headed "I Have Seen the Future, and It Irks," Carter takes a long look at the development of 1950s SF, beginning by pointing out that it

was the only contemporary literature in which protests against McCarthyite witch-hunting were consistently presented.

He goes on to expand on the evolution of SF as a vehicle for popular satire and social criticism — this was the time of *The Space Merchants, A Canticle For Leibowitz,* and *Fahrenheit 451,* and of Kingsley Amis's coining of the descriptive phrase, "comic inferno" — which once vigorous mode seems to have fallen back a little onto some high shelf. Nowadays, the SF novel spends a great deal of its time out among the dragons and troves of milieux far from our actual situation.

Which leads me to wonder just how effective the comic inferno really was, as an instrument of social action. As Carter points out, one reason SF was able to get away with digs at McCarthy while he was spearheading drives to strip libraries was that SF was beneath notice. Isn't this an argument that SF — being no different from any other literature in this respect — cannot be effective as a deliberate vehicle of political action, for as soon as it becomes concerted in such an action, it has developed in effect a single head and can get it cut off.

I really do think we simply got away with something in respect to McCarthy, and I doubt there was a concerted effort, as distinguished from exactly the same sort of generalized discomfort with establishmentarian smugness — rife in the 1950s — that gave rise to all sorts of variously sharp-witted reactions among us as individuals. The arts make a very poor vehicle for deliberate campaigns of any sort, almost immediately turning into something indentifiably not art and thus not effective as art. I'm not saying Carter credits us with community action as distinguished from individual reflexes within the community that presents a unifiable aspect in hindsight. He doesn't, but the mention gives me the opportunity to remind us all, also, that things run in cycles. Viz.:

During World War II — shortly before which the Red Army had permanently occupied my country and shipped most of my relatives off to the labor camps for the crime of being schoolteachers, journalists and civil servants — I was continually being struck by the willingness of the American general public to believe in Uncle Joe Stalin, Valiant Fighter for Democracy. And since then I have been just as struck by the unspoken but automatic assumption that democratically installed and supported institutions are so feeble, and subversives so uncannily effective, that the only remedy in these desperate times is to harrass everyone in sight lest the wicked go unpunished — apparently for having done so little as to have been undetectable.

What goes around, comes around. Let us not brag on what "we" did, for "we" didn't do it although we may all someday yet hang for it. Let us rather continue to each be what we are, and if

someday we can discover what "we" are, let us then brag on that.

Facts — just plain facts, accumulated by patient unearthing — are the foundations of all other edifices built on scholarship. But there's very little payoff in accumulating facts. Any issue of *Reader's Digest* will suffice to demonstrate that the payoff is in doing interpretations, and that the fewer the facts, the more spectacular the interpretations can be.

Similarly, in academe the payoff is in the thesis. You may get a Nobel Prize someday for basic research, but you get an appointment, and tenure, for finding some even passably new configuration of old knowledge from which to draw conclusions.

And so when a scholar of facts goes by, I rise and bow, which is after all easier than being equally selfless. In a couple of weeks after I write this, I'm trotting over to the annual do of the Science Fiction Oral History Association, whose miles of tape will someday bring the voices and reminiscences of (a sadly incomplete roster of) our time into the PhD programs of universities yet unfounded, all honor to promulgator Lloyd Biggle, Jr. Among the voices we shall never hear, however, is that of Robert Ervin Howard.

To get at what Conan's creator might have thought and felt, in that brief span before he got his gun and blew his brain away, someone had to sift through old correspondence, interview the survivors, walk the ground of Cross Plains, Texas. Howard has only been dead since June 11, 1936, and there are even arguments about what his middle name was, to give you some idea of how quickly time can silt over what you'd think would be imperishable.

(His father apparently screwed it up on his birth and death certificates, to give you some idea of the way garble can get into the record from ostensibly irreproachable sources. Alternatively, this is an example of the way stubborn scholars can controvert properly recorded archival data by impugning the source.)

The de Camps have me convinced they got the right of it in that case. The de Camps doing the convincing are L. Sprague and Catherine Crook de Camp, working with Jane Whittington Griffin, a Texas-born child psychologist who taught at the University of Pennsylvania. Together and severally, in aid of their Howard biography, *Dark Valley Destiny*, they tracked down seemingly every trackable fact there is about Howard, a moving target.

Sprague de Camp is known, among the many other things he is known for, as a leading force in the Conan revival that began with Donald Wollheim's *Avon Fantasy Reader* but then proceeded via a series of books, first from Gnome Press, and at first was comprised of reprinted short stories but gradually filled out with additional fiction based

on found fragments, and then on what can only be called extrapolations of one sort or another. I've always felt that the work of this sort done by de Camp and Lin Carter came closest to recreating what Howard himself might have created.

Mind you, I'm no Conan fan, having betimes referred to him as, for instance, the Ass of Aquilonia. But I am a fan of Sprague's and thus to some extent of what he deems worth doing, and I am a fan of scholarship; the sheer weight of card-filing that must support this book is of itself arguably a very gross tonnage.

Putting it all together, and then trying to make it yield some coherent pattern of inference, must again have presented the de Camps and Doctor Griffin with a great deal of drudgery whose only rewards were the knowledge that no one else would do it at all and the justifiable suspicion that no one else could do it as well. Certainly this is not the sort of book that will make an overnight popular smash and unmanageably swell the coffers of the de Camps or of Doctor Griffin's estate. This was a piece of work, drawn out over years and done meticulously, that was done for its own sake.

What do we get out it? A fully articulated background to a literary figure whose importance to (paradoxically) the *fin-de-siecle* half of the twentieth century in America transcends literary bounds and enters into the sociology of our time. Hence, the groundwork for a grasp of several only seemingly unrelated mass phenomena clearly relevant to any study of this nation under pressure from contending entities, and, for lagniappe, a connection back into the traditions of the American frontier and of the demographic factors related to the American Civil War ... all of which the de Camps have traced through Howard's family history, and which Jane Griffin apparently was able to weave into an explication of Howard's psyche.

In other words, what we have here is a first-class landmark in the scholarship of our field, and in scholarship, period. No flights of angels sang Howard to his troubled sleep, and frankly there is little lyricism in *Dark Valley Destiny*, either. But there is grace in honor intelligently paid, and that is what the authors of this study have given their subject.

This is, incidentally, the first Bluejay book, from a company created by Jim Frenkel, former SF editor at Dell. And I think we ought to give Jim his due, as well, for having been willing to launch his line in such a manner.

We shall return to scholarship. Meanwhile, next up is *Nebula Award Stories Seventeen*, edited by Joe Haldeman, celebrating the 1981 awards year, advance copy barely delivered to my house in time for Christmas, 1983. I wonder what went wrong at Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Not much went wrong with the

text, which contains some uncommonly good stories, even for an anthology drawn from nominees to and winners of the annual awards of merit given by the Science Fiction Writers of America.

There is also some of the usual sort of furniture; a useful list of all the 1981 winners and nominees; an overview of the year's fiction by Algis Budrys, who says to remember that the short story usually leads the trends in SF; a more graceful essay on the year's audio-visual scene by Baird Searles. But it's the fiction that makes these engines churn, and this one has travelled far more than a year's worth on its 365-day run:

There is Kim Stanley Robinson's "Venice Drowned" and Jack Dann's "Going Under." There is brand-new writer William Gibson's "Johnny Mnemonic," and Michael Bishop's "The Quickening." And those are just the expertly-done, absolutely unconventional, stunningly effective stories of pitiless, unsatyric comment on the ways of the world, speaking of where the cutting edge has gone.

Among top-flight work that is half a step closer to what you've seen before, there is a very well-chosen excerpt from Gene Wolfe's Book of The New Sun novel, *The Claw of The Conciliator.* Does that give you an idea of what in this book seems relatively conventional? With it in that category are John Varley's "The Pusher," Gardner Dozois's "Disciples," and George Florance-Guthridge's "The Quiet." At least the last of these will on first reading make it seem I must have gotten my categories mixed up; the same could be said for any one of them, really.

What a long way this field has suddenly come, again. I was transfixed by this anthology, a trick not pulled on me to this extent since *Adventures in Time and Space.* (I realize this must sound like hyperbole.) Clearly there is a whole new universe of creation out there, and editor Haldeman, relaxedly lacing the book together with deft comment and apt juxtapositions — And the omission of the actual short story winner? — leaves me with the firm impression that he and his colleagues are easily in charge of it.

Certainly Haldeman has taken his editorial responsibilities seriously and with uncommon innovation. Excerpting the Wolfe was an imaginative idea, as was the idea to reprint the two winners of the 1981 Rhysling Award for SF poetry, even if that did mean the poems were from 1980. (The poems are "Meeting Place," by Ken Duffin, and "On Science Fiction," a well-written but pernicious piece of work by Tom Disch, [speaking of bragging on what we are] relaying the same facile message they taught him in England to make him feel he had finally gotten in.)

So it's far more than just a good solid anthology, a book of record, and all that you might expect. It is a groundbreaker or at the very least a stele erected at the spot where ground was smitten. I imagine this trade edi-

tion is essentially a library book; a paperback will come along in due course. But every serious library, yours included, ought to have it in the form suitable for much re-reading and for studious poring-over in hindsights to come.

And, speaking of years to come, he said with a wry grin, this has been mostly a column about scholarship; here it comes 'round again: Gentle reader, please disregard the biographical data about me in the intro to my contribution. It's apparently drawn from Brian Ash's execrable but obviously immortal *Who's Who in Science Fiction*, probably as then partially repeated in the Nicholls *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, and thence onto the flyeaves of some English paperbacks of my mind, multiplying and procreating with a horrid persistence that threatens to swamp what poor facts God might proffer in rebuttal. Joe, thanks for the many kind words, but if you wanted to say something about me, why didn't you ask me? We all know that even the Nicholls could use another edition.

You could all do me, and the future, a slight favor: every time you come across a copy of the Ash, please tear out Page 57. You will thus also destroy much of the ashinine asseveration on John Brunner, some on David R. Bunch, and all of the entry on Ken Bulmer, but I suspect they would also thank you. (I have to assume Ash simply applied as much education, intelligence and sincere inference to his task as he could bring to bear. That is called "making it up," and is not the same as scholarship, which consists of actually going to the source and looking under all the rocks, no matter how inconvenient this gets. That's why we honor scholarship, there being so damned little of it around to honor.)*

**For starters, does it seem likely, really, that Lithuania would have a Government-in-Exile three years before the well-documented outbreak of World War II? (Speaking of middle-aged whitecollars marched to strip medicinal tree bark in the swamps of the Tundra, and dead guerillas laid across schoolhouse steps as an instruction to the young.) In the event, there never was any such thing, and therefore my father didn't represent it in the United States or anywhere else. And that's just for starters; unfortunately, there clearly will never be a finish.*

Molly Gloss's first story for F & SF is a sensitive story of a "meeting of minds" that flows through life into death itself.

Joining

BY

MOLLY GLOSS

From where I was lying I could see the hole in Sevin's chest, the edges of his shirt still smoking — and I stared at that, I never looked at his face, I focused on the hole. And the pain. There was a wide scald of it under my breastbone, so I couldn't quite breathe, just these little sucks of air burning in and out. It felt like I'd lost a lung. I mean, it felt like Sevin had lost a lung. The robomed could come up with an artificial lung, I was pretty sure artificial lungs were in its programming. But the robomed was in the Osprey. And the Osprey was at the bottom of the hill.

I could see the farmer, too, crouched beside Sevin. There was a lot of buzz in my head, so I could just hear the peaks of her voice when she turned her face toward me — "... can't ... don't ... won't...." — all the negative sounds bumping high and pointed through the static. But I could feel her brown tones of soundless anguish, and I could see she was dropping some real tears over Sevin, as if she mourned him, as if she'd known him more than half a day — and I couldn't even think of her damn name.

I didn't see her come to me. I was so focused on the Joining that I lost track of her, and then one of her tears fell in my mouth as she leaned over me. She was trying to find my wound, I guess, but it damn near killed Sevin. I broke thought a little when she startled me, so the pain slid away and down, slick as mercury, and it was so good to be rid of it and I was so damned aching tired, I almost let it go without thinking. Then Sevin — unresisting, sliding, too — made this small sound that wasn't pain, only a sigh, but it cut me like a razor. I scrambled for him, and in about half a minute we were O.K. again, balanced again, teetering together.

"Si-Rad," I said, when I remembered the farmer's name, when the Joining grew smooth and seamless and there was room in my head to remember.

She said a word I didn't know, or maybe it wasn't a word, quite, just the sound you'd make if you stepped on your cat, surprise-grief-soothing-apology, and she touched my wrist. "Sevin's not dead," she said to me, or asked me. There were tears hanging fat and clear in her eyelashes.

"Not yet," I said. I had wanted to put it stronger than that, with more hopefulness, and I don't know why it came out straight and honest instead. I'd rather have lied a little and made myself feel better. *He's not hurt too bad. I can fix it.* Instead, like the farmer, I began to cry. I couldn't get enough air to do it right, but I lay on my back in the dry leaves with Si-Rad holding me by the wrist, and I managed to squeeze thin dribbles of water from my eyes, a few sticky tears that ran down through my beard in the corners of my open mouth.

"Give me a hand," I said to the farmer. I thought she might object, might make useless *you-shouldn't-be-moving* noises, so I quickly tacked on a little disclaimer — "I'm not hurt" — which wasn't strictly true, and must've made me look a damn fool, since I was weeping, lying scrunched up and panting in the weeds. I don't know what she thought, whether she believed it, but she swiped at her wet face with the sleeve of her tunic and then took hold of me by the shoulders and helped me scrabble across the slope to where Sevin was. There was less pain than I was braced for. I just couldn't get enough air.

I touched him right away, took hold of his hand to feel he was still warm — which was a stupid, irrational thing, I guess, but I was better after I touched him, like after the crying. He looked at me sidelong. He didn't want to move his head. I could feel it, fragile as glass, knew, like him, that it would shatter if he was careless. So he looked at me sideways and tested out a smile, a stiff one showing thin white rim of teeth, and then squeezed his eyes shut. *Myles,* he sent, as if my name were a string and he were drawing a bow across it, playing a dark chord, resonating inside my head. *Don't let me kill you.*

I began to weep inside, without meaning to. *The hell with that,* I thought, but I don't know if he heard me.

"Unsnap this," I said to Si-Rad. I couldn't get the damn storm belt undone, couldn't see the fastener through the smear of wet, and I had to wait for her to work it loose and snake it off my hips. I dumped everything out of it onto the ground and knuckled my eyes and roamed through the first-med stuff.

"Get that open," I said, and then I scissored Sevin's shirt away from the hole while Si-Rad bit the nipple off my

plastic tube of aseptic. It was gluey, the color of shit — tasted shitty, too, if you went by Si-Rad's face. I had her squeeze every last drop of it onto Sevin's chest. Then I ripped open the biggest seal I had and centered it over the hole and touched it in place. It made a small hissing sound when it pressurized. It was white and square with the corners rounded off, had a very sanitary look covering up that charred crater. It didn't do a whole hell of a lot of good, but, as with the crying and the touching, I felt better seeing it done. Then Si-Rad helped me spread the plastex sheet over him. He was breathing shallowly and carefully, this thin rheumy wheeze, but I could feel him hanging on to me a little, all the effort wasn't mine anymore, and the Joining felt smooth. Now that I wasn't working so hard, I was mainly tired because he was. I let myself down on my back beside him and closed my eyes. The lids scratched across the lenses as if there were sand between.

"Myles?" the farmer said, and managed with the one word to squeeze in a lot more, something along the lines of, *What the hell is going on with you?* At least that's what I thought at the time.

"I need a minute. I'll be O.K. in a minute."

With my eyes closed, the ground moved a lot. As if I were in a boat and the sea were high. Rocking, awash, I didn't sleep, but I dreamed a little, playing it over again against the back of my eyelids, the big shape of the cadmium miner standing out from the rocks along the escarpment, tangle-maned, thick-chested, giving off deep red ripples of enmity.

"That's the one," Si-Rad had said, and then wiped her palms on her trouser legs. I remember feeling the dim blue of her fearfulness.

Sevin spread his hands innocently. "My name is Sevin," he yelled to the rocks, to the big man standing among them. "This is Myles. We're with Outspace Security. Peacers. You can see the ID from there?"

The man's chin lifted a little, but he did not speak. There were streaks of black now in the red that came from him.

Sevin kept his hands apart and open. "OS records show the land here registered for farming." He shaped the words so they were smooth and matter-of-fact and benign, and I stood behind him and painted a canvas of sympathy, patience, calmness, stroking those cooler colors over the man's reds, brushing out his clotted passion, while Sevin spoke him down.

"Si-Rad here has filed a complaint with OS. She says you've cut off access to her summer graze, polluted a stream, butchered some of her goats. That's for the courts, we don't accuse you. But the fact is, this quadrant isn't designated for cadmium mining."

He would have said something more, something about filing with Outspace Ministry for a proper permit to mine in this place. We had arbitrated

these kinds of disputes a couple of hundred times before.

But then the miner's mouth opened slightly, and the red went suddenly very dark. He never yelled a warning, the alarm I felt was someone else's — the farmer's maybe, or mine, a heartbeat late. The man's hand simply came out, pointing, and his gun sent its pale blue ribbon through the shadow under the trees. With an edge of eye or mind I could see Sevin arcing down, silent-falling, hands spread wide reaching, even while I killed the man who was killing him — soundless, too, just the blue tracers spurting through the shade and the wide-eyed surprise above his mouth, above the place his mouth had been — and then I only saw, only felt Sevin, heavy dangling from the edges of my mind. *Sevin!* And I sent him what I had, all I had, an umbilicus: *don't let go don't let go don't die damn you love you don't die don't....*

Myles."

I opened my eyes. Si-Rad was sitting lotus-fashion on the leaves next to Sevin. Her eyes were very brown under cramped-high brows.

"Just need a minute," I said again.

She watched me gravely without moving. There was nothing coming from her now except a faintly lavender anxiety. Behind her head, through the limbs of the trees, there were heavy clouds sliding toward the east ahead of the high-up winds. It would rain before too much longer, rain on Sevin's chest, on the white pressure seal and the smooth, closed half-circles of his eyelids.

"I don't suppose you know how to fly an Osprey," I said. What the hell, it was worth asking.

"I've flown Kites."

I looked toward her. I don't think I smiled. "The Osprey is not a hell of a lot like a Kite."

"I have a talent with machines. I might be able to figure it out."

Then I guess I did smile a little, but it felt lopsided and faintly bitter. I said, "I don't think so. You stay with Sevin. There's a robomed in the Osprey. I'll walk down and fly it up here." Just like that.

I half-expected her to ask what a robomed was. Some of these outspace ruralists lead a pretty isolated life. But instead she said, "You left the ship there in the first place because there wasn't room to land in these trees."

"It's armed. I'll blast a clearing."

She studied me awhile and then she said, "It's a couple of kilometers. I don't think you can walk that far."

I didn't want to lie outright if I could help it, and anyway, there was no telling what she thought was wrong with me. So for now I only said, "It might be less than that," and I looked away. I needed to get up. To get to the Osprey. But it felt like I had five hundred kilos pressing on my breastbone. So for a minute more I lay on my back and stared up into the crowns of the

trees where the sky ran fast and dark. I could feel Si-Rad watching me quite a while. She was working out the right words, I guess, or working up nerve. Finally, she said, "You're Joined, aren't you," just as straight as that, so it wasn't a question. When I looked at her, she said, "You're lending him some of your healthiness, borrowing some of his hurt. And I don't think anyone Joined to a wound like that one could walk two kilometers." She never lowered her eyes. She was sending a watery green now, so maybe she was a little embarrassed to know more than she should, but she never lowered her eyes from me.

"I thought you were a farmer," I said, after I'd thought it over.

"I am."

She damn well knew what I was getting at, so I just waited through the silence until finally she added, "My parents were both psy-gifted. They freelanced for COM and DOC. Sometimes even for OS. I wasn't trained — I guess they thought that would lock me into government service, and they wanted more choices for me — but I learned a few things at home. I don't eavesdrop. But a Joining—!" She lowered her eyes finally, lowered them to Sevin. Not to his patient, closed-up face, but to the place where the seal made a neat square on his breast, beneath the transparent plastex.

In a minute she said, "I didn't think you could hold him. When he went down, I thought he would surely die. I thought you would die, too. I could feel you make the Join, and I thought when he died he would suck you down with him." Then she said, like it didn't matter, like an afterthought, "My mother died that way. Trying to lifeline a friend." But there was old, faintly violet grief in the air. I wanted to, but I couldn't think of anything to say to that. Maybe she didn't need anything said. Anyway, in a while she offered again: "I can try to fly the Osprey. Maybe you can tell me enough so I could do it."

I had spent two years learning to fly an Osprey. But I just said, "Stay here with Sevin," and then I sat up. When I did that, Sevin opened his eyes. His face seemed very lean and colorless. I wasn't sure how much he'd heard, until he bespoke me: *You won't get a hundred yards.* With something like amusement. The hell, I thought. With something like irritation.

I drew my legs under me and pushed against the ground to get up. Tried to do it in one smooth motion. Didn't quite make it. The vertical lines of the trees tipped off sideways, and then I felt Si-Rad's hands holding me. She had wide hands, a good strong grip. Her face was right there, peering at me. There were several narrow lines that runneled down alongside her mouth, and straighter ones, deeper, between her brows. Her skin was walnut-colored, walnut-seamed. With those great, clear brown eyes. I could've learned to like her face, if I'd have had more time.

"O.K.," I said, and then she dropped her hands from me and took a step back. I bent over and rested my palms on my knees and panted. She was giving off long streams of blues and browns, so I could feel her ache trickling through my own pain.

She said, "If you fall, Sevin will feel it." She must have been a good home study.

I didn't look at her, or at Sevin. "I won't fall."

"If you fall and strike you chest, the blow will probably kill him. Probably it will kill you, too."

"I said I won't fall." I whittled my voice down thin that time.

I straightened out my back and looked down the slope where I would need to go. There were drifts of dry leaves between the trees. I would have liked it better if the ground had been clean. I wanted to see where I was putting my feet.

"Hold his hand," I told her, without looking at either of them, and then I started down the hill.

"Wait."

I kept going. I heard her boots, and then she put a hand on my arm. "Wait."

I expected more of her damn self-taught psy theory, but she surprised me. "We're going at this backward," she said, like she was surprised, too. "We can find a way to get Sevin down to the Osprey instead of the other way round."

I caught Sevin's dark blue alarm, had a vision of a glass skull spidering with cracks. "We can't move him," I said. I would have shaken my head to double the negative, but my own skull felt thin-walled and distended.

She made a gesture with both hands, faintly impatient, dismissing me. "Yes, we can, if we do it right. I told you, I'm good with mechanics. Maybe I can take parts off the Osprey and make some kind of powered litter. Air-cushioned. Will your comp talk to me? If I had the use of a good comp, I might be able to make something that would work." Her voice had come up some, and she was running the words together like she was excited and maybe pleased with herself.

I looked sideways up the hill at Sevin, at the clean white seal and the trimmed-back edges of burned shirt and him watching me under drawn-down brows. I could feel the woman's sureness. And by this time I was pretty sick. But I looked at Sevin and waited. he was the one with the glass head. And after a while he told me, for the second time, *You wouldn't get a hundred yards.* But it was flat, resigned. And, hell, he was right.

I walked back up to where he lay, then leaned against a tree and skidded down along the bark until I was sitting. Si-Rad stood waiting, watching us.

"You'll need a key to punch in the comp," I said. There were fourteen digits. I meant to drone them off. But it must have seemed like too damn much effort because I wound up just sending

her the whole thing in a tidy and soundless little package.

I thought about it afterward, and I guess it had been quite a while since I'd bespoken anybody but Sevin. Quite a while. Anyway, there was a strong feel of awkwardness, of an ill-fit, when I bespoke this stranger. Si-Rad pulled a face — embarrassment, apology, bereavement — something. And I was sorry I'd done it.

I said, "You'd better get going," squeezing the words so they were small and hard.

But she didn't leave right away, just stood there watching me with that look around her eyes. Finally, she ducked her chin, and I saw her slide her eyes across Sevin, like he'd said something private to her. She took a couple of steps to go. Then she looked back. "I know a little about Peacers," she said. "My parents worked with a few. They said OS had a lot of trouble with the psy-pairing, the bond getting too tight or something. They said if one of the pair was killed, the other would usually suicide."

My eyes began to ache. Or maybe it was Sevin's eyes. I pushed against mine with my knuckles. "I've heard that," I said, from the darkness behind my closed eyes.

I felt her waiting awhile, and then finally she made a faint whistly sound, a sigh, and she went away, pushing her boots through the piles of dry leaves. I dropped my hands from my eyes and watched her walking long-strided at first and then breaking into a trot, with her arms pumping smoothly at her sides. I watched her until I couldn't see the brown of her tunic against the trees anymore, and then I put one hand on Sevin's arm and closed my eyes and began to wait. As long as I didn't move, there was not too much pain.

I could hear Sevin breathing carefully. And after a while I could feel him thinking carefully, too, thinking what he would say, how he would say it, how he'd get me to promise. Damn her.

The hell with that, I thought.

After a while it rained. The first drops fell in big, clear beads, stinging cold, few enough to count. Then they came finer, grayer, a tattered wet sheet. I crawled over to the pile of things I'd dumped on the leaves, all the stuff from my storm belt, and pawed through for the khirtz tent. I didn't inflate it right away, though; I looked at Sevin. He was watching me, blinking his lashes against the rain. He was pale and sooty-looking, the color of old snow.

"I'd have to move you a couple of meters," I said. "To get you inside it."

I guess not. Sounding easy inside my head, easy and familiar and undamaged.

I don't want you lying out in the wet.

You'd better not move me, Myles.

The rain was sliding sideways off his cheeks and running inside his ears and beading on the clear surface of the

plastex sheet. I was cold. He had to be, too. But I didn't move him. I lay down next to him on the sodden leaves, got under the sheet, and pulled it up over our heads, tented a little like we were kids reading under the blankets at night. I lay on my side and put my arm around him. It hurt me to lie like that, made it hard to get air in my lungs, but I could feel him shaking a little, and his cheek where it touched mine was chill and wet. So I held on to him. I lay on my side and took air in through my open mouth, and I held him in the curve of my arm and the curve of my mind.

I could still feel him worrying that old bone she'd dropped. And finally he spoke loud, furry-voiced and phlegmy with only the one lung, the first time he'd spoken aloud since he'd been hit. "Tim made it," he said. "He lost An Ching and he made it back. He even paired up again. He and Solder are working somewhere out in the Badlands now."

"The hell with that. I don't want to hear about Tim. Shut up about him. I've got hold of you and we're waiting for Si-Rad and I don't want to hear about that other." I had begun to cry again, so the last few words were blurry wet. My chest was weighted down and hurting a lot, and this time weeping didn't help; I still had that ache behind my eyes.

Sevin gave me a couple of minutes, and then he said, with a voice that was ragged-hoarse, that didn't sound like him, "I want you to wait, at least. Maybe they'll send Tim in to talk to you. They'll send somebody. And you can wait that long, until they get here. Whoever it is. There might be somebody able to see you through it." And then he said again, "I want you to wait," patient as hell, as though I were a little kid and needed drilling to get it to stick.

"Shut up," I said, or thought, *Shut up.* After a long time, I heard him sighing. And after that we didn't speak, or couldn't. We lay stiffly together and listened to the rain touching the outside of the plastex sheet.

A long time later, a thousand hours later, I felt Si-Rad coming back up the hill, sending ahead of her a bleakness, a defeat as gray as the rain, and as cold. Sevin must have felt her, too. I started to speak, to tell him some utter lie or maybe just make some promise I couldn't keep, but, ahead of me, he bespoke. He was understandably tired, but he put together the frayed strands one at a time until they wove a last dark line: *You can live without me.* And then he cast free.

I didn't know it right away because at first there was just the color, purple-black deepening, and we were together inside it in the dark purple under the sheet, and the ground melting under us — and there was no pain, finally, just the warm, damp darkening. And then Sevin said, *Wait,* and he went down ahead of me. I was holding him, I thought I had a tight hold, and he just

slid free of me and sank until the womb-dark closed over his head. I waited. He had told me to wait, so I waited inside the color that was like a bruise, and I patiently counted my heartbeats. I might have waited quite a while, but the color thinned, went violet and then lavender and finally gray; and in that new, cooler light I could see the walls that were rising slick-smooth, curving in high around me; and inside them, in the silvered empty-echoing space where I waited, I could see I was alone. And that was when I began to be afraid. I thought of what I would tell Sevin. I waited awhile, I would say, but there was no one there, and I was afraid of the aloneness.

Someone said, *Myles.* She pitched the name like a life ring curving high over the wall, and I watched it scribe its bright arc through my space, watched it sink in the darkness under me. I couldn't think of her name. I remembered there had been that chafing between us when we touched, that dissonance — she was the wrong, the unfamiliar one; I wanted Sevin.

She said, *Myles* again, with more gentleness or more distress, so the name sang in my head, bow against strings, elegy for cello, grays and browns. And there was some of Sevin in it, some of his voice, or his feeling. Sevin's dead, I thought then, with a sort of painless surprise. Sevin's dead. My eyes were very dry. Without

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tears. There was not much pain, it was just that I didn't want to be alone. So I let myself down in the darkness, at the place where Sevin had gone.

Then I felt something from the other one, a spurt of despair or terror, and unexpectedly she cast herself in where I was, a floundering clutch of mind in the blackness, ropes of purples and greens and blues, no pale walls in the private place where she tried to tow me, only the vivid endless opaque colors of her anguish. She was clumsy and afraid — I should have been able to cut loose from her — but she clung stubbornly, had no muscle to check me but dragged heavily behind, setting heels in the soft darkness, terrorized, mulish: *don't go don't die please wait don't!* As though she did not remember or did not care that she was dying, too. And when she bespoke me so in the darkness, I could feel her-our excruciating pain and loneliness and fear. And where we touched at those places, where we bled into one another, there was no strangeness. We just fit together. We made a whole.

So that, without ever deciding to, I decided to wait. And I began to weep. "Si-Rad," I said, remembering.

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Chet Williamson ("Rosinante," April 1984) returns with something quite different and quite funny. Mr. Williamson's work has appeared recently in Playboy, The New Yorker and Twilight Zone.

Will the Real Sam Starburst...

BY
CHET WILLIAMSON

Alexander Meyer, author of the best-selling Sam Starburst novels, arrived in San Francisco this morning as Guest of Honor of the World Science Fiction Convention. Meyer, 48, will attend only three of the convention's fourteen scheduled days of activities in the newly rebuilt St. Francis Convention Center. "I'd love to stay for the whole saturnalia," said Meyer, "But I've got to get back to New York to finish polishing the latest Starburst." Sam Starburst, the character Meyer created in 1987, is a detective of the future whose seven cases to date have sold over fifteen million copies.

— Associated Press

M.I.T.'s Dr. David Holliday announced today his completion of a process that can completely alter the appearance of a human being in less than two weeks. "It's a combination of DNA research, plastic surgery, and good old American know-how," Holliday told reporters, declining to discuss any details.

— United Press International

Dr. David Holliday, formerly of M.I.T.'s Genetics Department, has sold his process for the physical transformation of human beings to Dow Chemical for an undisclosed sum. Holliday will oversee research, development, and marketing of the new process.

— *Special to The New York Times*

"It's the next step in makeup, that's all," says Dr. David Holliday of Permaguise, his new scientific process to remake human beings in whatever image they prefer. "I see us as Avon ladies of the future."

Dr. Holliday is the perfect adver-

tisement for his process. Though well into his sixties, his skin is tanned and unwrinkled, his hair is black and wavy, and his face bears the classic features of a young Greek god, perfectly complementing his 6'2" 190-pound frame. "I used the discus thrower of Myron as my model, with a bigger fig leaf," he chuckles.

The process of being Permaguised consists of a three-day fast and a two-week immersion in a Permaguise tank, where the patient loses consciousness and is nourished intravenously. The act of physical transformation itself is top secret. "A little dash of remote plastic surgery, a whole lot of DNA, and," Dr. Holliday grins, "some T.L.C. The whole thing's computerized — untouched by human hands."

The procedure is expensive, from fifty to a hundred thousand dollars, depending on the Permaguise desired. But in the year since the process has been marketed, there have been over seven hundred satisfied customers. "If you're not happy with what God gave you, this is the perfect solution," says Chloe Holliday, the doctor's wife for thirty-five years, and a dead ringer for Rita Hayworth, the screen siren of the '40s. "Even if you let yourself go to pot, you can always get back in the tank. Next time I'm trying the 1966 Raquel Welch."

Though custom-made Permaguises outnumber celebrity copies five to one, among the most popular choices are Errol Flynn (circa 1940), Burt Reynolds (1977), Catherine Deneuve (1973), and Julie Christie (1968). When asked how celebrities are responding to having their features copied, Dr. Holliday replied with his typical enthusiasm. "Great! Most of them are flattered. We've got a few spoilsports threatening us with lawsuits, but you can't patent a face!"

Perhaps not, but if you could patent success, there's no doubt Dr. David Holliday would have the formula.

— *People* magazine

LEED: So if we can avoid that hurricane, odds are we'll have a pretty nice weekend. Bob?

RANDOLPH: Thanks, Tom. Our closing story tonight concerns a pretty darn unique crime. Seems a man claiming to be actor Richard Gere walked into the bank where Mr. Gere has a large account, and asked to make a $350,000 withdrawal. A bank vice-president made out the necessary papers and ordered a teller to get the cash. It was only after the veep closely examined the man's signature that he summoned guards, who arrested the man.

HERR: But Bob, didn't they know what Richard Gere looks like?

RANDOLPH: That's the funny part, Barbara. The man, whose real name is Clifford B. Ringhoffer, had had his appearance changed the previous week to a Permaguise of Richard Gere. Apparently the resemblance was perfect.

HERR: Hmm. I wouldn't be surprised if the Permaguise clinics get a lot of re-

quests for saggy millionaires next week.

RANDOLPH: You said it, Barbara. Well, for the Six O'Clock News team, I'm Bob Randolph....

— Transcript: WBAL Six O'Clock News

PHONEY HUBBY SEDUCES MOTHER OF FOUR

PERMAGUISE PLAYBOY TELLS OF WILD SEX WEEKEND

BOY EATS OWN FOOT TO STAY ALIVE

— Headlines: New York *Post*

The Third District Court of the State of New York ruled today that Permaguise, Inc. may no longer transform patients into the physical duplicates of living people. Permaguise was further ordered to pay $2,000,000 to Mr. and Mrs. Lester Bachman for psychological damages resulting from the now famous "Twin Husband Case." The Bachmans told reporters, "We just want to forget this whole sordid business."

— United Press International

BACHMANS SELL BIO RIGHTS TO LORIMAR

"They've promised us dignity," Couple Say

— Headline: *Variety*

9:00 — 3, 8, 15, 27 — WORLD PREMIERE MOVIE: "Which One's Lester?" The Bachman "twin-husband" case is given a humorous new look. Pilot for a possible fall series.

CAST

George Lewandowski (Before).....Dom DeLuise
George Lewandowski (After)
Lester Bachman.....John Ritter
Sheila Bachman.....Loni Anderson
Detective Roherty.....George Kennedy
William Kunstler.....Tim Conway

— *TV Guide*

STARBURST IN NOVA by Alexander Meyer. MidAmCo, 329 pp., $18.95.

In Meyer's fourteenth adventure of Sam Starburst, the extraordinary character is as thrilling as ever, and shows no sign of the tired familiarity that often plagues character series. In this episode of a fictional biography that bears comparison only to Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and James Branch Cabell's multivolume biography of the life of Manuel, Sam Starburst finally meets The Masters, the black-cloaked cosmic oligarchy who have stolen free will from the minds of humanity and replaced it with a system in which all intelligence trickles down through the bureaucratic hive-mind of The Mediators, whose galactic stronghold Starburst destroyed in the previous novel, *The Maw of the Mediators.*

Meyer's books have consistently topped the bestseller lists in both hardcover and paperback for the past ten years, and there is no reason why this rich yet accessible volume should not do the same. Highly recommended.

— *Today's Books*

* * *

Neil Aldero signed a new, six-figure contract with MidAmCo Publishers in October, the highest contract ever for dust jacket art. The deal contracts Aldero, illustrator of all fourteen of Al Meyer's Sam Starburst books, to continue for the next five in the series. Along with the flat, six-figure fee, Aldero will receive an undisclosed sum when the illo is reprinted on the trade pb, mass market pb, and Magabook.

— *Zenith*, "The Journal of SF"

LETTERMAN: Our next guest is someone you've all heard of, many of you have read about, but none of you have ever seen in the flesh. But we've got him here in person tonight.

MCMAHON: Heyo!

LETTERMAN: Heyo! Ladies and gentlemen, believe it or not, Sam Starburst!

AUDIENCE: APPLAUSE

LETTERMAN: Well, Sam, I guess you can hear from that reaction that people are amazed and delighted at actually seeing you here.

STARBURST: It's gratifying, David. Really nice.

LETTERMAN: All kidding aside, though, you weren't really born Sam Starburst.

STARBURST: No, David. My name at birth was William Bunce. But I've legally taken the name of Sam Starburst.

LETTERMAN: You've taken more than the name, haven't you?

MCMAHON: Heyo!

LETTERMAN: I mean, the resemblance between you and the illustrations of Sam Starburst is perfect. And in case our viewers haven't figured it out by now — and I know some of them are pretty sleepy....

MCMAHON: How sleepy *are* they, David?

LETTERMAN: Shut up, Ed. Sam Starburst here is the result of Permaguise. Why did you decide on Sam Starburst, uh, Sam?

STARBURST: I was sixty-eight, my wife had just died, I only have one kid, and he's a broker in Santa Fe. So I thought, what the hell, maybe this Permaguise thing would give me a new lease on life. At first I wanted to be Clark Gable, but now with the estates suing and all, I didn't want to take the risk. So one night I was reading *This Blaster for Hire*, and the idea hit me of becoming Sam Starburst. So I went through all the books, looking for Starburst's description. And it turned out that this Aldero who does the pictures had painted him exactly like Meyer described him in each book — scars, moles, the works.

LETTERMAN: You took all these details to Permaguise?

STARBURST: Right. And they developed the program. It took days to get it into the computer.

LETTERMAN: And you changed your name as well?

STARBURST: I figured I look the part, I may as well act it.

LETTERMAN: You know, somebody wanted to have a Permaguise done on them of me.

MCMAHON: Who was that, David?

LETTERMAN: Billy Barty. But Herve Villechaize wouldn't be the bottom half!
MCMAHON: Thee commercial, boss! Thee commercial!
LETTERMAN: We'll be right back with Harrison Ford, Christie Brinkley, and Dr. Dub Wallace, creator of the new "I-Hate-Cats-So-I-Eat-'Em" Diet. Stay with us!
— Transcript: "The Tonight Show"

Attorneys representing Al Meyer brought suit this week against Sam Starburst, formerly William Bunce. Mr. Starburst is a Permaguise copy of the character created by Meyer and illustrated by Neil Aldero, the co-claimant. "I'm flattered that someone likes Starburst enough to turn himself into a copy of him," Meyer said, "but when he calls himself Sam Starburst and goes around opening shopping malls and guesting on 'The All-New Hollywood Squares,' it's too much. We want this thing to stop, and we want damages as well."
— *Zenith*

In an unexpected move, attorneys representing Sam Starburst (formerly William Bunce) filed a countersuit against author Alexander Meyer for libel. "There are sixteen books in stores and newsstands all over this great country," said attorney Douglas Newcombe, "that depict my client, both in name and appearance, as a main character, portraying him as a killer, a thief, an adulterer, and a cunnilinguist, not only of humans, but of nonhumans as well.

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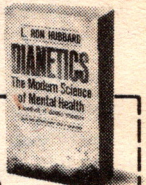

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It's an outrage, and my client won't stand for it."

Although attorneys for Meyer recommended he remain silent, he met with reporters briefly. "These people are insane," Meyer said. "*My* Sam Starburst was first. Hell, *his* Sam Starburst *is* my Sam Starburst. This is just a bluff to get me to agree to an out-of-court settlement, and it won't work."

It appears that the libel case will be heard first, as Meyer's attorneys are still uncertain what statute Starburst has violated in their suit against him.

— United Press International

KOPPEL: I'm Ted Koppel, and this is "Nightline." The Meyer-Starburst libel trial is finally over, and tonight we'll take a look at the decision, the consequences, and the people involved. Our guest is Brian Sidney, attorney for author Alexander Meyer, against whom the judge's ruling went. Mr. Sidney, so you plan an appeal?

SIDNEY: Of course. The judge's decision was based on the most absurd piece of reasoning I've heard in a courtroom in thirty years.

KOPPEL: Before we discuss that decision, let's look at Mr. Meyer's reaction to it as he left the courtroom today:

Reporter: ...will you do now?

Meyer: I'll appeal! I'll appeal! This is ridiculous*!*

Reporter: (UNINTELLIGIBLE) ... possibility of changing the name?

Meyer: What? No way! Sam Starburst is mine, no matter what any (DELETED) judge says! Of all the (DELETED) stupid....

KOPPEL: Author Alexander Meyer, in response to today's court decision....

— Transcript: "Nightline"

JUDGE DONALD BARNES: There he was, standing in front of me, a living person. I'm supposed to say he doesn't exist? He's there, and the books are libelous. Absurd or not, it's the law.

— Transcript: "Meet the Press"

Among the Permaguise libel suits for March are:

Travis McGee, Miami Beach Fla., v. John D. MacDonald; John Carter, Richmond, Va., v. Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc.; Michael Hammer, New York, N.Y., v. Mickey Spillane; Rabbit Angstrom, Shillington, Pa., v. John Updike.

— "Brief Briefs," *Today's Law*

ATTORNEYS FETE DR. DAVID HOLLIDAY

— Headline: *American Bar Association Journal*

STARBURST AUTHOR GUNS DOWN PERMAGUISE DOC OUTSIDE PLAZA!
AL CONFESSES — "I PLUGGED DOC HOLLIDAY!"
MAILER & SFWA PLEDGE DEFENSE FUND FOR WRITER-KILLER!
MOTHER DEEP-FRIES SON TO EXORCISE DEMON!

— Headlines: New York *Post*

John Morressy's frequent contributions to F & SF always give new perspective to even traditional themes. In Stoneskin *he achieves this yet again, ably and entertainly demonstrating that a reputation can be invincible — and vice versa.*

Stoneskin

BY

JOHN MORRESSY

He rode through the forest slowly. The hooves of the big war-horse made scarcely a sound on the thick turf. The mist was dense and still, chilling him even through cloak and padded jerkin and heavy breeches. He pulled the cloak close around him, to guard his ring mail from the moisture as best he could, and rode on nodding, half-asleep.

A scream jolted him awake. It came again, from off to the left, and then was cut short. He guided the horse toward the sound, and soon came to the edge of a clearing.

At the far side, dim in the murky light, was a small cottage. A figure burst from it, running, followed by two others. The running figure appeared to be a woman. She fell, and the two men in pursuit stood over her. He heard their laughter.

There were two of them, and he was alone, but he spurred the horse and rode directly for them, morning star poised to strike. They were ragged louts, on foot, armed with cudgels and no match for a mounted warrior.

They heard him coming, and turned, but they were helpless before his rush. He smashed the skull of the nearest. The other threw down his club and ran. He rode over him and left him whimpering in the mud with a broken back.

He returned to where the woman lay, a huddle of dark rags on the sodden ground. As he dismounted, she stirred, but did not attempt to rise. He looked around warily, then drew his dagger and stepped to her side.

"They're dead," he said in his flat rasping voice. "What were they after? Speak."

She moved again, weakly. A shudder ran through her, and she rose to

hands and knees. With his free hand, he reached down and turned her face to him, holding his dagger ready to strike.

Her beauty was so totally unexpected that it shocked him. He drew back; then, recovering his wits, he laughed harshly and sheathed his dagger.

"I see what they wanted. I'll take it for myself."

"No need to take by force what I give you willingly," she said in a voice soft as a caress.

"You're sensible. Or do you go on your back for every man who passes?"

"You saved me. I am yours by right."

"So you are," he said.

He leaned down to clutch at her frayed robes, but she laid her hand on his and said, "Come inside. You need food and rest."

"Time enough for food and rest when I've had my fill of you."

"My house is clean and warm, and my bed is waiting."

He pulled her to her feet. Her beauty, as she stood before him, was dazzling in its perfection. Under the muddy, dripping rags, her figure was full and inviting.

He cast a suspicious glance at the cottage. "Anyone else in there?" he asked, holding her by the wrist.

"We will be alone. Come," she said.

He motioned for her to lead the way, and followed a few paces behind with drawn sword. The interior of the cottage surprised him. They were alone, as she had said, in a room he had not expected to see in a simple woodland cottage. In the light of a score of candles, it was clean and shining and sweet-smelling as a queen's bower. The floor was of gray flagstones, scrubbed smooth, and the furnishings were of pale oak, carved and joined by a master's hand. A fire burned brightly in the fireplace, warming the splendid bed that stood nearby.

"What would you have of me?" she asked.

He inspected the place quickly. The cottage had no other entrance, and the shutters over the two small windows were barred. He barred the door himself and turned to her.

"I'll have you as a man should have a woman. I've had to satisfy myself with stinking peasants, no better than beasts," he said, looking upon her ravenously.

He threw aside his cloak and pulled off his boots. She began to remove her dark robes, but not quickly enough for him. He tore them from her and forced himself upon her in a frenzy of desire.

When his initial passion was sated, he stripped and lay beside her. He had no notions of love or tenderness, and no trust; but when he awoke in the night and drew her to him, he took her gently.

In the morning, she was not beside him. He raised himself on one elbow, instinctively taking up his sword, and then he saw her, dressed in her ragged

robes, seated by the fire, rocking slowly back and forth. She stretched out her hands to the fire, and his mouth went dry at the sight of them: they were chalky pale, and her forearms were as thin as sticks. When she turned to face him, he cried out in horror at the mummified crone before him.

"Where is she? Where's the woman?" he demanded.

"She is here," said the old woman, and he recognized in her cracked voice the one who had whispered to him in the night.

He sprang from the bed, raising the sword for a stroke that would shear the witch in two. Her eyes flashed coldly for an instant. She raised a hand in a languid gesture, and the sword clattered to the flagstones. His arm hung dead and insensate at his side.

"Do not attempt violence on me," she said.

"All right. No violence. But give me back the use of my arm."

"I will give you more than that before you go. Why would you harm me?"

"You deceived me. The beautiful woman was only an illusion."

"Perhaps this is the illusion. Did the woman feel real when she was in your arms? Did you think you were rutting with a shadow?"

"She was real. But why did you do it?"

"It suited me. Do you lust after me as I am now?" she asked, laughing thinly at his stupefied silence. "I thought not. Go, dress yourself. You look like a fool standing there naked, gaping at me."

"Give me back the use of my arm."

"You have it — but leave the sword where it lies."

He dressed quickly. He wanted nothing now but to be away from this place. His work was the work of muscle and steel. Magic was beyond his understanding, and it frightened him.

"Let me take my sword and go," he said as he fastened his cloak. "I will not try to harm you."

"Why are you in such a hurry to leave me? Do I frighten you?"

"I don't like what I don't understand."

With a black grin, she said, "And all you understand is fighting and killing, eh? Raping, burning, looting — you understand them well, eh? Who's your master, soldier?"

"Whoever pays," he said.

"But no one pays now, or you would not be riding in the forest alone, cold and hungry. How long since you've eaten?"

"Yesterday ... early in the day," he said. As he spoke the words, his empty belly growled and his mouth watered at the smell of roast meat.

"A piece of bread hard as a stone, was it? And a sip of stinking ditchwater? A man like you needs good food. Eat your fill," she said, pointing to a table on which stood steaming platters. He saw roast fowl, crisp and brown; a blood-rare joint of beef;

bread of fine wheat, snowy white; heaped fruit whose sweet ripeness glowed in the beaded skin; a pewter flagon and a single pewter goblet. He had not seen any of these things a moment ago, and could not even be certain that they had been there. But the feast smelled real, and when he tore a leg from the fowl and bit into it, it tasted real, and the wine was rich and pungent as only the best wine could be.

He seated himself and settled down to a leisurely meal, the best and most abundant he had ever eaten. When he could cram down no more, he laid his hands on his belly, turned to the old woman, and said, "It was good."

"You're sparing with your gratitude," she said drily.

"It's seldom I'm called upon to thank anyone," he said. He paused to belch, then added, "but I thank you."

"Good, good," she said. "You've had a night's pleasure with the most beautiful woman you ever saw, and you've eaten as few kings in this benighted land have ever eaten. Now, I suppose, all you want is a bag of gold to consider yourself well rewarded."

"I've never refused gold."

"It is there for the taking," she said, and when he looked down, a leather pouch lay beside his goblet. He pulled it open, and spilled the gold onto the table. As he ogled it, she added, "I will give you something better, besides."

"If you have something better than gold, I'll take it."

She turned aside and began to rummage in a chest that stood at her side. "I had a good look at you. You've had four arrows cut out of you, and three sword cuts that took a long time to heal."

"I've recovered. And I've learned a few things."

"Here," she said, turning to face him. She held up a bit of filmy grayish stuff that looked like a scarf. "Put this on. Come, put it on. I'll help you."

He came closer and stood over her. "What is it?"

"A glove. A very special glove, for your sword arm," she said, taking his hand.

She slipped the glove over his fingers and began to work it over his hand and wrist, pressing and smoothing the thin material so as to fit it perfectly to his skin. He watched as the gray faded, and his own skin showed through, dully at first, but soon healthy and fully flesh-colored, as though the gray glove had become transparent, or been somehow absorbed. The tightness he had felt at the first touch was gone from his fingers and hand, but he felt it rising as she worked the glove up his forearm, smoothly fitting it just below his elbow, where a thin black line marked its edge.

"It fits you perfectly," she crowed. "I knew it. I knew you were the one!"

"What do you mean? Have you been waiting for me? That can't be!"

"You know nothing of what can and cannot be. Kembrec accepts you.

You are the one, and that is all you need know."

He stared down at his hand and arm. There was no sign of the glove now, only the black line encircling his forearm. He could feel no seam, no trace of a juncture. "Who is Kembrec? What happened to the glove you put on me?" he asked, and there was fear in his voice.

"Kembrec was a man of power, and the glove was once his flesh. His enemies overcame him at last, and as he lay dying they dismembered him. They thought they could destroy him forever by doing so. I took his hand and arm, because I knew the secret. They never suspected," said the old woman, rocking back and forth as she had done when he awoke, looking dreamily into the fire. "I stripped the skin off very carefully, very slowly and carefully, and I preserved it, because I remembered his promise. The others thought ... ah, who knows what they thought, those frightened men. They wanted him dead, because they feared his power, and they got what they wanted." She looked up, and her eyes were bright. "But I preserved the power."

"What power? What are you saying?"

"I have said enough. You gave me what I sought, and you have your reward. Go now, as you wished. Go!" she commanded.

He took up his sword and left the cottage without another word. His horse was stabled in a small outbuilding. He had been fed and groomed. Harness and trappings were laid out in careful order, but there was no sign of a hostler.

Harnessing his mount, he led it from the building and into the clearing. Looking back, he gasped in sudden fright. The cottage he had left a short time before was now a sagging ruin, as was the stable. With a shudder, he sprang into the saddle and spurred the horse. When he looked back again, there was nothing in the clearing but the morning mist.

He rode without stopping, his mind in turmoil, wanting only to get far away from that witch-haunted spot. He could not understand the things that had befallen him. The beautiful woman had been no illusion; he could still feel her warmth and softness, and picture her beauty. The smell of her hair and the taste of her mouth mingled with the smell of the food and woodsmoke and bedclothes, and the taste of meat and wine; they were as real as the witch who had sat by the fire and talked of incomprehensible things. His arm felt no different, and it looked no different except for the black line below his elbow. There was no trace of the glove she had placed on him so carefully. He wondered what magic had been worked on him.

Late in the day he scented a village in the wind, and turned toward it. He did not like peasants or their ways or their stinking, waddling women, but he did not want to spend this night

alone. Even the company of dolts was better than being left to dwell on his troubled imaginings.

The villagers welcomed him, and their welcome seemed genuine. They lived in constant fear of marauding bands, and the presence of a free lance among them gave an unaccustomed sense of security. They fed him on rank meat and gruel and hard bread — poor stuff, but the best fare in the village — and offered him a dry place to sleep. He chose to stay in the loft of the stable, near his horse; the hayloft rats, he judged, would be less bother than the fleas that swarmed in every house.

He awoke in the morning to a great outcry. Quickly donning his mail shirt and taking up his sword, he descended in time to meet three villagers who had come seeking him.

"Raiders, master! They come to plunder!" one cried.

"They will kill us all and burn the village!" said a second, wringing his hands.

"Save us, master! Drive them off!" begged the third.

"Where are they?"

"They are in the village square," the third man said.

Despite the danger of the moment, he could not help but smile at the term. The village was a pile of squalid hovels; the "square" was an open patch of mud, a wider place in the narrow track that ran through it. He shouldered his big two-handed sword and walked outside.

Nine men were in the square, two mounted and the rest on foot. One of the mounted men carried a sword, the other a long-handled battle-ax. There were three pikemen, three swordsmen, and a crossbowman. All were hard-faced men of good size. The village could hope for no mercy from this band.

"Good day to you, swordsman," said one of the men on horseback. "Is this your village?"

"I spent last night here. One night was enough. Nothing here but fleas and rats. And peasant women," he replied, and spat.

"Do you say so? Well, women are women. There's sure to be a bit of food, and the place will make a decent fire to warm our hands when we're done with it."

He did not reply, only stood his ground, the sword still resting on his shoulder. The horseman moved a bit closer.

"That's a fine sword," he said.

"It is."

"And a good mail shirt, too. Give them to me, and I'll let you keep whatever else you have and leave unharmed."

He knew then that he would have to fight, and there was small chance of winning. He was a match for any two of these men — except the crossbowman, who could be deadly — but no man living was a match for nine. Still, it was better to be cut down fighting than to be kept alive, unarmed, to

amuse this lot, and he would give them plenty to regret before he fell.

As he shifted his weight, the leader nodded to the crossbowman, who dropped to one knee and released his bolt. He moved so quickly that the swordsman was taken by surprise. Something struck him on the forehead, just above his eye, with an impact no harder than the slap of a child's hand. The bolt spun high in the air, and the swordsman stood blinking in astonishment.

"Pikemen!" the leader cried.

Two pikemen dashed forward. They bore simple lances, made for thrusting, and once he slipped the points and got within striking distance, they were helpless. As the second one went to his knees, clutching at his spilling entrails, the swordsman turned and saw, too late, the third pikeman thrusting for his belly.

The point drove home with all the man's strength behind it, and it felt like nothing more than a pat on a comfortably full stomach. The pikeman cried out and dropped his weapon, and the swordsman made short work of him.

The remaining men were less eager for combat now. He did not understand what had happened, but he saw the fear on their faces and knew that he had a chance to live. The crossbowman was occupied fitting a new bolt; two of the swordsmen fell back, and the third, hesitating only an instant, joined them. They knew that their ordinary blades were like sticks of wood before a two-handed sword that could cleave an armored man in half.

Too late, he heard the horse bear down on him. Before he could dive aside, he was flung down in the mud. He rolled and looked up at the descending hooves of the leader's mount. Twice he evaded those plunging hooves, but the third time they landed full on his knee and thigh. The bones should have been splintered by the impact; but he felt nothing.

Whinnying and shaking its head wildly, the horse drew away from him. He climbed to his feet, uninjured, and as the leader charged, he caught him across the midsection. The leader screamed and toppled from his horse.

At this, the second horseman tried to flee, but the peasants pulled him down. Hearing his cries, the others fell to their knees before the swordsman.

"Spare our lives, master, we beg," one cried.

"Spare us and we'll serve you faithfully," said the crossbowman, abasing himself.

He stood over them and looked down contemptuously. "Four of you against one, and you surrender. What good is the service of your kind?"

"I've never begged mercy before, master, I swear it," said a third. "But I'll not do battle against a man made of stone. I'll serve that man, but I'll not fight him."

"I saw the bolt bounce off your forehead, and the spear break on your belly!"

He listened, the sword at rest on his shoulder. At last he said, "Get up. Keep your weapons. Take the horses to the stable and wait there." To the ring of peasants that stood around him, he said, "These men are friends, and see that you treat them as such. The ones who would have harmed you are dead. Bring their weapons to the stable."

"As you say, master," one of the peasants replied, and the rest moved to obey.

"Hang the bodies along the road. Let them be a warning to others," the swordsman added.

As the four raiders slogged toward the stable, leading the riderless horses, and the villagers went about their work, he stood alone, thoughtful, in the calm mood that always came over him after violence. He remembered distinctly things that could not have happened. The raiders spoke of them, too, but they could not be. No bolt would have rebounded from his forehead; it would have gone into his skull and killed him on the spot. His chain mail could not stop a pike; his bones could not have withstood the impact of a war-horse's hooves.

He saw a child grope in the mud and bring forth a small object, then turn to gape at him in openmouthed awe. A man, seeing the object, also stared at him.

"What have you got, boy? Bring it to me," he commanded.

The boy came forward fearfully and held out a crossbow bolt. The head was skewed to one side, the tip mushroomed as though it had struck a stone wall full force.

"Bring me the pikes!" he cried.

Two of the pikes were in perfect condition. The head of the third was bent and blunted, and the shaft was split. He let out his breath in a loud puff of sheer wonderment; then he thought of the witch, and her gift. She had made him invulnerable.

He settled in the village while he made his plans. It was an easy, comfortable period, the first rest he had known in a long time. The four raiders proved loyal, and the villagers treated him with a respect that bordered on veneration. They came to call him "Lord Stoneskin."

As the story of his victory spread, new arrivals came to the village, seeking the safety to be found there. He admitted all who wished to join him, and by the end of summer, the village had more than doubled in size.

The price of safety was service. He commanded that all villagers spend part of each day building a hall for him and his men. The hall went up on a rise overlooking the village, with a clear prospect of the approaches. It had a deep well, a cellar for provisions, and formidable defenses. He had no need for protection himself, but deemed it wise to provide it for his followers, and for such goods as he might amass.

He learned more about his gift as the summer drew on. Not only was he immune to the weapons and the assaults of others, he could not even injure himself voluntarily. His health was better than it had ever been, and his old injuries no longer gave him pain. He could not tell whether this, too, was the witch's doing, or was simply the result of his eating better and resting well. Whatever the answer, it appeared to him that the witch had made him immortal — or close to immortal. He could not fathom her reasons, but in a short time he stopped questioning, and accepted his fortune.

In the autumn, after the harvest, another marauding band came to the village. This band was larger than the first, and better organized. The leader wore a gleaming breastplate and greaves, and rode a fine black stallion. His followers showed soldierly discipline as they took up position in the enlarged village square.

By this time, Stoneskin had added several of the strongest and quickest young men of the village to his little force, arming them with the weapons of the fallen raiders. They took their posts unseen by the newcomers, and waited. He walked into the square alone, bare-chested under an open leather jerkin, his sword resting on his shoulder.

"Is this the village of the one called "Stoneskin?" the leader demanded.

"I am Lord Stoneskin, and this is my holding."

"A prosperous village, and well fortified. Surely you do not hold it alone," said the leader. Stoneskin did not respond, or even acknowledge the remark, and he went on, "People have said that you cannot be injured by any weapon of man."

"Have you travelled all this way to find out if they speak the truth?"

"We want food, and a place to lay up for the winter. This village will satisfy us."

"Serve me faithfully, and you're welcome here. Otherwise, there is no place for you."

"Now hear me, Lord Stoneskin," said the leader of the marauders with heavy sarcasm. "There're twelve of us and one of you. I'm sure you have a few loyal supporters hidden here and there, but they'll be no help to you. If our weapons can't bring you down, our numbers will."

There was no point in debating. Stoneskin sprang forward, raising the blade to clear the horse's head and take the rider across the midsection. The leader brought his own blade around and caught Stoneskin at the juncture of neck and collarbone. His blade shattered, and the great two-handed sword sheared through pommel, breastplate, and flesh and tumbled him to the ground in a spray of blood.

Standing over the fallen horseman, Stoneskin said to the others, "You heard my terms. Stay and serve me, or go and don't try to come back."

Six of them charged him, crying out for vengeance; the rest dropped their weapons and stayed back. When four of his attackers went down with four strokes of his blade after he had taken, unharmed, blows with ax and sword that would have killed any man, the last two threw down their weapons and prostrated themselves before him.

"Take your lives and go," he said, when he had regained his breath. "Tell what happened here, and tell it truthfully."

Blubbering their gratitude, they rose. They turned and fled from the village without looking back.

More men came to the village before the snows closed it off, but they did not come to challenge Stoneskin. They came to offer loyal service, and he accepted them. Families came, seeking his protection; camp followers, vendors, and a wandering healer arrived. A tavern opened near the hall, and grew to be a thriving inn.

Three years later, Stoneskin left the village. It was now a prosperous town, protected by a garrison of well-trained fighters and elaborate defensive works, as well as by the power of his name. He had thought his plans through, and was now ready to carry them out.

He traveled to the east, stopping at every village and town to accept tribute and enlist the best fighting men. His name raced before him, and he was everywhere received with deference. There were no challenges.

When winter came, he was master of the province. At the end of the second winter, the two adjoining provinces were his. In five years, he ruled all the land, and proclaimed himself King Stoneskin. No one disputed his claim.

Years of brutal war had left the land devastated and the people demoralized, without trust in their leaders, without faith in anything. Stoneskin offered them hope. To the common people, the issues underlying the struggle had always been obscure. They knew only that since the time of their fathers, life and property had been subject to the whim of armed bands that appeared from nowhere and, for no reason their victims could understand, robbed, raped, killed, and destroyed. Any armed man was the enemy, come to punish them for disloyalty to a leader they did not know and a cause they could not comprehend.

Stoneskin was different. He came to them himself, walked among them unarmed, and offered them a simple choice: serve him and enjoy his protection, or deny him and go on as before. Few wished to risk denying him, and none who had the desire had the courage.

He declared that he was married to his kingdom, and would have no other wife; he took the daughters of the most powerful landholders and warlords as his concubines, and set about building a dynasty.

His children were born mortal. Like the children of ordinary men, most of

them did not survive their first days of life. But many lived, and as their number increased, Stoneskin was faced with a problem he had never known before. He was not certain that the witch's gift to him could be passed on; in any case, it could go to only one of his children, and that one might choose to be a tyrant over the rest. Stoneskin realized that he did not want such a thing to happen.

In his entire life, he had never been close to anyone, or cared much for another. He had no memory of parents, or a family, or love. For as long as he could remember, he had been fighting, or preparing to fight, or recovering from battle. Now he had to fight no longer, and he came slowly to care for his children, and his people, and to want to spare them the life he had known.

For a time, the problem was no more than a minor concern; for all he knew, he might outlive generations of descendants. But when he woke one morning with his head burning and his bowels turned to water, and lay for five days alternately shivering and sweating, his mind tossed and wrung by wild imaginings and visions, he knew that the gift of the witch could not protect him from sickness and fever. He might be invulnerable to all weapons of men, but he was mortal still, and must admit that the day would come when he would guide his kingdom no longer.

The new knowledge forced a decision on him. He surrounded himself with wise and farsighted elders, and listened carefully to their words. Slowly he learned to be a ruler. He created structures, and laws, that would enable his descendants to live in domestic peace, and an army to protect them from external aggression.

He ceased eventually to carry weapons or to wear armor. The fact of his invulnerability was known to all by this time, and none came to test him with the sword. Only once was an attempt made on his life, and it was made by subtler means than steel.

He knew that some of the scholarly elders who advised him held him in secret contempt for his lowly origins and sudden rise. Since he did not fear their envy nor seek their admiration, he did nothing to remove them; their wisdom was needed. But when three of them remained behind after a council, and he detected an odd taste to the wine they offered him, he knew that their envy had gone beyond tolerable bounds.

He drained the goblet, wiped his lips, and refilled it. Holding it out to the oldest of the three, he said, "The wine is particularly good this day. Drink it."

Awareness glinted in the old man's eyes, but he did not falter. He took the cup, murmured, "To the king's health," and drank every drop. He turned the goblet upside down and returned it to his master.

The expression of the others was

fearful to see as Stoneskin refilled the goblet and, without a word, handed it to the white-haired woman who stood unmoving before him. Her hand shook as she accepted it, and she was pale as mist, but she drank it off in a single draft.

As Stoneskin was refilling the goblet for the third time, the old man groaned and fell to his knees, clutching at his stomach. The third adviser, a middle-aged man of great skill in debate, threw himself to the ground at Stoneskin's feet.

"Be merciful, King Stoneskin!" he wailed. "I was misled. They persuaded me that you would lead the kingdom astray. I did it for your children's sakes, and for your people!"

"Liar!" the old man cried in a broken voice.

The woman pointed an unsteady hand at the groveling figure and said coldly and deliberately, "He turned us to this. Called you a tyrant and usurper. Said ... only the wise are fit to rule."

Stoneskin sat with the goblet in his hand, brimful, and listened to the agonized cries of the old man and the woman as they died the death they had planned for him. When they were still, the man at his feet looked up and whispered, "Mercy!"

Stoneskin offered the goblet. "Here is my mercy. Take it, or die a worse death."

The man rose to his knees, and with shaking hands, took the goblet from Stoneskin's hand. He raised it to his lips, and under Stoneskin's unblinking gaze, he emptied the contents. When he, too, lay still, contorted by his death agonies, the king summoned his guards to clear the chamber.

No public announcement of the attempt on the king's life was ever made, and Stoneskin never spoke of it to his other advisers. No future attempt was made.

King Stoneskin's territories grew, and his power increased, with each passing year. He received visitors from the neighboring kingdoms, and some from distant lands with unknown names, and he accepted their tribute graciously. It did not surprise him to have emperors and kings seek his friendship; he knew that they were aware of how dangerous an enemy he could be. But when, in all earnestness, they asked his advice on affairs of state, he was astonished. His gift was not statecraft, not wisdom or foresight, it was invulnerability. Wisdom he left to his council.

Since these outlanders sought his advice, he gave it; and when they returned to their own lands and did as he had counseled them to do, they prospered. He came to realize then that in his years of wielding power, he had learned much about its ways and uses. This knowledge changed him. He became more thoughtful, relying less on his gift and more on his judgement.

One day in the sixteenth year of his reign, he received a pair of visitors who came with a strange request. On a cold dawn at the very brink of winter, when no one traveled the roads unforced, a young man came to the court of King Stoneskin leading a woman whose eyes were covered with a dark band. The woman stepped haltingly before Stoneskin, threw herself on her knees, and begged him to use his power to restore her sight.

"I am no healer, woman," he said gently.

"A healer cannot help me. I ask your magic."

"I am no sorcerer, either. Only a man."

"You are a man with a great gift, a power that lifts you above all others. Use that gift to help me, I beg you," the woman said piteously.

"My gift is not a healing gift. It is a protection that I do not understand, not a magic I can pass on to another."

"You have magic. Magic is all that can help me now," the woman persisted.

He came forward and raised her up. "Tell me how you lost your sight," he said.

"There was a witch. She sought to take my boy from his cradle when he was newborn. I fought her, and drove her away, but she cursed me. That very night my eyes burned with pain. The next day, I saw as through a mist. Soon I could not see at all," the woman said matter-of-factly.

He called for a bench to be set by his throne, and led her to it. "You deserve such help as I can give, madam. I promise you shelter and protection here for the rest of your life, and a place for your son where he can rise as far as his abilities take him. I can do no more."

"Only look at my eyes. Touch them. Will me to see again," she implored.

Her son looked at him in silent appeal. Stoneskin knew he could do nothing to cure this brave woman, but if his touch could comfort her, he was willing to give it. He ordered the room cleared of all but mother, son, and himself.

When the door shut behind the last of his court, the woman unbound the dark cloth covering the upper portion of her face. The eyes were ageless, bright and alive. They flashed as she raised her hand in a swift gesture, and Stoneskin fell back in the throne, numbed in his limbs and powerless to cry out.

"You have prospered," she said, in a voice he well remembered. "The nameless mercenary has become a great king. And all thanks to me."

"I acknowledge that. I'd be dead now, but for your gift."

"My gift, King Stoneskin? No, say rather, 'my loan.' It will now pass on to its proper wearer."

He looked at the young man, who gazed back at him hungrily. "Our son?" he asked.

"So he is. I named him Kembrec, for the one who should have fathered him, and whose flesh he shall wear," she said.

"Talk when it's done, Mother," said Kembrec, drawing his dagger and stepping to Stoneskin's side. He drew back the sleeve covering the limp arm, to reveal the dark line that ringed the forearm. With smooth, surgically exact strokes, he cut around the mark and stripped the outer layer of skin off like a glove.

Stoneskin felt nothing. The arm revealed was as pale and dry as a long-weathered branch, smooth as marble. It bled scarcely at all. But even as he watched, color slowly began to return to it. He tried to flex his fingers, and found that he was now able to move.

Kembrec had slipped the loose gray glove of flesh on his own hand at once. Now he stood with his hand upraised before his face, and his cold laughter rang through the chamber. He pressed the point of his dagger against Stoneskin's chest.

"What will you call yourself now, Father? 'Stoneskin' is no longer appropriate," he said.

"I never chose that name."

"If I kill you, you'll need no name," Kembrec said, pressing the dagger until it broke the skin. "I could do it easily enough now."

"He's done all he was meant to do. Let him live," said the witch.

"I will let him live," Kembrec said, stepping back. "But not out of gratitude. I want him to learn what it is to live in fear of dying. To live in fear of pain!" he cried, suddenly lashing out and cutting a notch in Stoneskin's ear.

"Why do you hate me so much?" Stoneskin asked mildly as he wiped the blood from his neck.

"Because you wore the skin of Kembrec while I waited. For years, I awoke each day wondering if this would be the day that some wild beast, or a stupid brute with a sword, would take my life before I could claim what was mine by right. I was prey to chance, illness, poison ... and you were beyond reach of all. And so I hated you."

"I'm beyond their reach no longer," said Stoneskin.

"No, no longer," Kembrec said with relish. "Now you can learn what it's like to be human, and face death."

"That's something I learned before you were born. I've forgotten it these twenty years, but I can learn it again."

"You will learn. I'll teach you fear before I leave this place."

"No, Kembrec. We must leave now," said the witch. "We need time to make our plans."

"*We? We* need nothing. Now *I* will plan, and do as I please."

"You're not ready, Kembrec. Follow my guidance until the proper time. You need my wisdom," she said, reaching out to grasp his arm.

"I need you no more, witch," said Kembrec, plunging his dagger to the hilt in her breast.

She gave a soft little cry and staggered back a step. Turning to Stoneskin, she gaped at him, wide-eyed, and opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came forth. She swayed and fell, and her robes sank around her as she crumbled to dust.

"So much for her," said Kembrec. "She would have tried to use me, just as she used you, and my namesake the sorcerer. I would never have been safe."

"And now there's nothing, and no one can kill you," said Stoneskin.

"Nothing! No one!" Kembrec cried. He slashed at his forearms, with no effect. He drove the dagger against his stomach and, laughing loud, brandished the blunted point.

"What will you do?" Stoneskin asked.

"I'll stay here, as long as it pleases me. This is a tolerable palace, and you'll make me an amusing fool," said Kembrec. He looked around the chamber, and stepped to the center to view it better. "Yes, I'll stay here, I think," he said.

"You surely will," said Stoneskin as he twisted the armrest of the throne and the floor opened under the astonished young man.

He peered cautiously over the edge, but the pit was black. When he kicked the empty heap of rags down, it quickly disappeared into the darkness. He could hear faintly the cries of rage that echoed up the smooth stone shaft, twenty times the height of a man, and wiping his bloody neck, he smiled. When the shaft was filled to the top with stone and mortar — the work would begin within the hour — there would be no more sound.

He pulled up the heavy collar of his robe to conceal the gash in his ear; it was best that no one knew of it. Losing the glove was inconvenient, but need be no worse than that. It was not really necessary to be invulnerable — only to be believed invulnerable. He turned and went to his throne, where he seated himself comfortably and smiled.

He felt almost sorry for Kembrec. The boy really had needed a wise guide. It takes time to learn that invulnerability, in itself, is not the solution to all problems, and that even an invulnerable man will not survive for long unless he learns to use his wits.

Kembrec, he reflected, would have an undisturbed lifetime to learn that lesson.

Films

BAIRD SEARLES

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

DROIDFUL

Once upon a time in 2036, there lived a lonely android on an abandoned and derelict space station (talk about your throwaway cultures!). His name was, of course, Max and the only company he had was a mad doctor who was his creator. Max knew he was a mad doctor because he had a video of a movie called *Metropolis,* and *his* doctor not only looked like the balmy inventor therein, but was also working on a *female* robot.

Through some inadvertant eavesdropping on the doctor's recorded journal, Max discovers that he is to be deactivated when the lady is activated, since she will be a good deal more sophisticated than he is. This is not too difficult, because Max has a large gap between his front teeth, wears a really hideous toupee, and has a physique reminiscent of a stalk of asparagus. And those are just the physical defects. He is socially inept and plays a lot of video games (two qualities which go together anyhow), and has to stop and think whenever a major decision is called for. All in all, he is not the best of all possible androids.

Neither is *Android,* the movie which recounts what happens when three fugitives in a crippled ship land on Max's station. One is brutal and bestial, one is clever and charming, and one is female. She doesn't have any other qualities since the only reason she's in the movie is that a fe-

male is needed to arouse Max's get-up-and-go (he wants to get up and go to Chicago — it figures). Brutal and bestial kills clever and charming, *and* the lady, and the doctor removes Max's Asimov circuits so he will kill b&b, which he does. (Their presence, however, did not stop him from zapping a police ship which had tried to land earlier — consistency is not Max's major characteristic — or the movies.)

But wait! — we've forgotten the female robot, whose name is Cassandra. She indeed is an improvement on Max, at least physically. No gap in the teeth, some physique (as revealed by the white robe she's almost wearing), and a really swell blonde wig — blonde and down to *there*. She's obviously been exposed to *Metropolis* also, since she has all the charm of the robotees in that film. She and Max kill the doctor, and she tears off the head and puts it in the dispose-all. But it's O.K. — he's a robot, too.

Despite the nonsense, there are some things to be said for *Android*. It's not pretentious, and the performers do what they can — Brie Howard, as the female fugitive, in particular, makes something out of the nothing role she's assigned. Don Opper at least makes Max an *appealing* klutz, bad wig and all. There is *not* excessive gore and violence for its own sake, despite the opportunity for such. And once in a while, the script shows some wit — Max, when packing for Chicago, places in his suitcase some clean shirts, some fingers, a hand, and a spare eyeball.

Production values are minimal; there are six actors and maybe ten supernumaries, and a handful of sets. The movie has an odd history; it started life as a Roger Corman production and was made in 20 days. It opened in the West as long ago as 1982, but the exec producers felt that it was different from the usual Corman exploitation film (the lack of violence mentioned above, for instance), and purchased the rights. It has since opened in England with some success, and is only now being distributed throughout the U.S., apparently.

Android makes an interesting contrast to the TV movie, *Prototype*, reviewed in this space last month. They are both concerned with an android's initial encounters with human society, and there is the coincidence of a subtheme concerning a classic movie. The TV movie is hands down the more adult, intelligent, and well-produced, and while no great generality can be drawn from this (there are crummy films made for the tube and classy efforts still get on the big screen, occasionally), the comparison here is striking. Perhaps it's only that, in its omnivorous need for material, television sometimes almost by accident shows something of value; in any case, the quality of a film can no longer be judged by the size of the screen it's produced for.

Videowares Dept.... Recently avail-

able on video cassette:

Caveman (1981) is a wonderful idea, which nobody's done since Harold Lloyd in the silent days — a caveman epic, dinosaurs and all, played for laughs. Unfortunately, much of this seems aimed at an audience which is about on the level of the characters in the movie — primitive. But there are a few saving graces which might make it worth a day's rental: the silly putty dinosaurs with goony expressions that do things like howling at the moon; a sort of yeti that doesn't quite move like any other movie monster I've ever seen and turns out to be absolutely unabominable; and the whimsical Shelley Long (of *Cheers)* as a very captivating cavelady.

An American Werewolf in London (1981) can't seem to find a focus or even a style — is it a comedy, a thriller, or a tragedy? Two university students on holiday in England are attacked on a foggy moor — one is killed, the other wakes up weeks later a werewolf. His dead friend keeps coming back in progressive stages of putrification (eventually accompanied by the werewolf's victims in equal states of decrepitude) to keep him up on what's happening in the werewolf line; very little of what goes on makes much sense. The transformation scene is accomplished with the wiggling muscles effect from *Altered States* and, at least, some logical attention is paid to the old clothes-of-the-werewolf problem. The hero ends up dead — and naked — in a London alley.

Coming soon

Next month: "The Greening of Bed Stuy," the first of two independent novellas by **FREDERIK POHL,** a story which is a compelling sf adventure and a stunningly inventive future history of New York City.

Soon: new novellas by **Marion Zimmer Bradley, Lucius Shepard, Jack Dann, Ian Watson, Jack Vance, Stephen R. Donaldson** and many others.

"Two Bits" is a new story in O. Niemand's series of sf tales about the domed city of Springfield, each using the style of a deceased American writer, here Ring Lardner. Past stories include "Afternoon Under Glass," (Hemingway, November 1983); "The Man Outside," (Steinbeck, April 1983) and "The Wooing of Slowboat Sadie," (O. Henry, September 1982).

Two Bits

BY

O. NIEMAND

Well, I bet you thought you was never goin' to see your 5 hundred again but the fight supprised us just like it supprised a lot o' folks. Now we are on our way on this rattletrap bucket of a ship somewheres called Peachtree where Two Bits will fight the great Suzavod. Who is Suzavod or really what is a Suzavod I hear you ast, and believe me I ast the same damn thing. I suppose we'll find out when we get there, just like we found out all about Kid Jupiter hisself.

Now you know when I come bustin' in again sometime with a hot tip you ought to do like I says. If you had went with 1 or 2 thousand instead of your measly ½, you would be rollin' in the dough. I wisht I had follored my own advice and then I would be rollin' in it to. Now I know I can lissen to Mick and even to Perbidge hisself. I can promise you that if they tell me Two Bits is in good shape I will put up 1 or 2 thousand o' my own funds against the great Suzavod and will write to you so you will have the chanct to double your money all so.

When we come to Springfield I and Mick never knowed o' Jendin Perbidge nor any other fighter there and we was both supprised to hear that they was a contender right in Springfield. When Mick says we wanted to find a fighter and this fella Perbidge turns up, I and Mick didn't put no stock in it when he says he was the number 1 welter contender. Mick give him a look in the gym, and Perbidge seemed like at least he had saw the ring from both sides o' the ropes, so Mick says to me that we ought to take him on.

Now old pal you recall where we come from a fighter with a handle like

Jendin Perbidge would of never got a bout with a 1 legged grandmother, so I said to Mick, "We got to find a good name for him."

"What's wrong with my name?" ast this Perbidge.

"It don't sound right enough by ½," I says.

"Don't worry," says Mick, "we'll come up with somethin' good. How's about Black Death Perbidge?"

"Naw," says our boy, "it makes me sound like a fry cook on a ferryboat. My name was O.K. with my pa and it was O.K. with my ma and all my brothers has never said nothin' that it was a bad name, so I guess I'll just stick with it a wile longer. I guess I know what my own name ought to be. You can't just take a fella and tell him that from now on his name is goin' to be somethin' different and he ought to hurry up and get used to it. I can throw a right cross just as good as Jendin Perbidge as I can anything else, and if yo boys don't like my name the way it is and won't honor our contract, you can just do the other thing with it."

Mick thought a wile and then he said:

"How's about Butcher Perbidge? We ain't had no Butcher in a long time."

"Sounds all right to me," I says.

"Naw," says Perbidge. "You couldn't get away with callin' me anything like Butcher on account o' my ma. She never liked for me to be no boxer in the 1st place and so I promised her that I would never hurt nobody unless they was hurtin' me. So I say I don't see why my own name ain't good enough. My ma would think I wasn't keepin' my word if she come out to the fight and everybody was callin' me Butcher. An' another thing. Rosie — that's my girl — Rosie would hate it right off the reel. She says she likes me just the way I am and probily couldn't never set around and talk with no joker called Butcher. They's a hole lot o' reasons and if you give a minute I will think up 1 or 2 more."

I give Mick the wink and I says, "Our boy likes to get his value from his two bits worth."

All of a sudden I seen Mick's eyes have lit up. "That's him all right," he says. "Two Bits Perbidge, the welter champeen o' the universe."

Well old pal, Perbidge looked like he smelt somethin' funny and he says, "Say, what kind o' crack is that?"

And Mick says, "It ain't no crack a tall."

"Then how come it sounds like a crack to me?"

Mick give me the wink back and says, "Two bits is what you give the porter to put out the lights , get it?"

Well it looked to me like Perbidge don't get much o' nothin', so I says, "Just like you put out the lights of everybody you fight," and I guess he liked that all right.

"But how come I got to have any nick name a tall?" he ast.

" 'Cause Jendin Perbidge sounds

like a wash woman is why," says Mick.

For a second I thought our boy was goin' cut loose on Mick's chin, but the boy cooled down some and finally agreed as long as all the posters used his real name to. That was in case some iggorant stranger might mix him up with all the other Perbidges around, and so you saw all the posters that said Jendin "Two Bits" Perbidge and I guess to this day he don't know how come he got that name. You could probily visit him on Springfield and he'd be glad to give you his two bits on any subject you care to mention.

Well it was about this time that they was lookin' for a new welter champ of everywhere on account o' they hadn't been none ever since the old champ, Kid Hoegemenimer, was ate just after his fight with Foyg on Blue Skies. So they was no welter champ and all the contenders got to take each other on and the 1 that licked 'em all would get the title. Two Bits give out the information that these other guys think they could be champ but the most o' them should ought to of stayed barbers or waiters or what they was before. It wasn't only that Two Bits got an opinion on everything and everybody, but that he liked to talk both your ears off and your nose tellin' you about it. When he started gettin' in shape he didn't like nothin' about the food or the hotel or all the work, and he kept talkin' until I and Mick couldn't lissen to the sound o' his voice no more. I slipped the mouthpiece in and he talked some more, and wile he's circlin' his sparrin' partner he's still yakkin'. "Hit him a couple in the face," Mick says to the sparrin' boy. "Maybe that will shut his yap." But it didn't.

One day this promoter name o' Dugel come into the gym. He watched Two Bits dancin' round for a little bit and then he says, "Is that the boy you're aimin' at the welter title?"

Mick nodded but didn't say nothin'. We run into this Dugel before.

"I got a boy workin' out all so," says Dugel.

Nobody says nothin' for a wile.

"The way I sees it," says Mick, "Perbidge here has got as good a chanct as any of 'em."

"Well," says Dugel, "I like my boy pretty good."

They was another minute or 2 when neither o' them says nothin'. Finally Dugal says:

"Your boy got to fight my boy sooner or later if he wants to be champ."

Mick says, "What's your boy's name?"

"Kid Jupiter."

I and Mick looked at each other. "I ain't never heard o' your boy," says Mick.

"An' I ain't never heard o' yours neither," says Dugel. "They mustn't be only a few fighters that knowed o' Kid Jupiter, but I bet oncet they are carried out o' the ring they don't forget him."

It went on like that for a wile, but before Two Bits is done workin' out Mack has signed a contract for him to go up against Dugel's Kid Jupiter. Dugel just happened to of had a couple blank contracts in his pocket.

Mick told Perbidge about the fight and Two Bits says that he never knowed o' no Kid Jupiter on Springfield nor anyplace else. Mick looked at me and says:

"You got to look up that boy in the book to-morrow to find out how many fights he has and how many knockouts. We got to know what we're up against."

"Sure," I says and I made a note to see if Kid Jupiter got the goods or not.

And then Mick wanted to know if Two Bits hisself got the goods.

"Perbidge," he says, "how many fights you been in?"

Two Bits got a look on his face which on somebody else might mean they was thinkin' hard but on his pan it was like a shadow a little cloud might make. They was never nothin' behind it. He says, "46 countin' the time they brang a big paper bag and I boxed my way out of it to settle a bet."

"And how many times did you happen to win?" says Mick.

"37," says Perbidge.

"Does that count the paper bag or don't it?" I ast.

Well, Mick decided that we had a shot at Kid Jupiter no matter how good that boy was, as long as Two Bits stood away from the skirts and the drinkin'. We figgured his girl Rosie would take care o' that for us. This Rosie was one that didn't nobody want to tangle with 'cep' Perbidge hisself. Mick talked to her and fixed it up that she should look out for her darlin' until after the bout. "Ain't nobody goin' to have no fun till after he flattens Kid Jupiter," Rosie complained.

Mick nodded and says, "That's the way it is. All's fare in love," and she wants to know what of it. Mick says, " 'Cause every time you look around you got to pay somehow," and she knowed what he meant right off.

At supper it was somthin' to see Two Bits dig in. He et like all the air in Springfield was leakin' out through a hole in the dome and he got to leave the table in a minute. The funny part was that he didn't never stop talkin'. I saw him put ½ a steak in his yap at one time and go on about his pa or 1 o' his bouts or somethin' else didn't nobody want to hear about. He talked from the time he set down till he almost et the shine off his plate. I and Mick learnt to appresiate his talin' so we never lissened to a word of it, but his girl Rosie payed attention to every single thing like they was somethin' special in it for her. Generally he always et the last bit o' food and was walkin' away yammerin' to Rosie before I and Mick even got the forks to our mouths oncet.

The big news was the next day when I learnt all about Dugel's boy.

"This is goin' to be some fight," I says to Mick.

"I'm pretty glad to hear it," he says. "How come you say that?"

" 'Cause Kid Jupiter ain't no boy."

I thought Mick's jaw was goin' to drop clean off the way he was lookin' at me. "You mean Two Bits is goin' to fight some girl?" That didn't bother him so much 'cause didn't neither of us have no trouble picturin' Perbidge givin' the wallop to some dizzy skirt. It wouldn't of bothered Two Bits none either.

"No," I says, "this Kid Jupiter ain't even a person."

Mick kind o' covers his eyes with a hand and asts in a real tired voice, "What is he then?"

And I says, "He's a big worm. A Jovian flameworm."

"Some day I'm goin' to murder that Dugel, you just see if I don't," says Mick. "Does our boob know yet?"

"No," I says.

"Well I got to tell him. We shouldn't ought to of come here in the 1st place. Have you even saw 1 o' them flameworms fight? Ain't no man alive can beat a flameworm if it's trained. I wisht I knowed how Dugel managed it."

It was a real tough spot. A Jovian flameworm is a thing can't no person whup it 'cause it's to dumb to know it's hurt. They was only 1 other flameworm in the fight game a long time ago and it never oncet lost or drawed a match. It was finally kilt by a angry crowd and cooked in butter and garlic and so retired undefeated light heavyweight champeen. They ain't more o' em boxin' 'cause they are generally all so to dumb to learn the rules.

Mick looked like he had a idear. I hoped he did have 1, 'cause I knowed I didn't. "Jendin'," he says, and Two Bits ought to of tumbled that somethin' was up 'cause Mick didn't never call him Jendin. "I just learnt somethin' that will make you happy and your poor old ma to."

Perbidge looked interested. "What's that, Mick," he ast.

"I learnt somethin' about this Kid Jupiter. He ain't a boy exactly. He's 1 o' these flameworms that you see sometimes givin' kids rides out to the zoo."

Two Bits thought this over and he didn't go for it a tall.

"I ain't gettin' in the ring with no worm," he says. I couldn't blame him, and Mick felt the same way 'cep' for the signed contract he got with Dugel. "I ain't afraid to go up against nobody," says Perbidge.

"If you come to me and say I got to fight the heaveyweight champ o' the universe, well I'd give it a shot. I ain't scared o' no man 'cause I figger no matter what he's got, I got somethin' all so and I can come back at him. I got the wallop and alls I need is the chanct to unload it. I got a Sunday punch and then some. But none o' that means a bug in a brick factory to a Jovian flameworm. I heard all about that other 1 that got et and somethin' tells me that's the only way to get a flameworm to lay down quiet." Two Bits went on for a wile but Mick must of

thought to let the kid get it out o' his system.

"But look at it this way," says Mick. "You can't hurt him no matter how hard yo try. They got skins that fixes theyself up real fast. If you cut it, the cut closes up in a couple o' seconds and it's like you never layed a glove on it. You can't knock its wind out and it ain't even got no jaw to clip."

"My ma will be happy to know that," says Perbidge. "But then how'm I s'posed to lick it?"

Well old pal you can see how Two Bits cut right to the meat o' the trouble. Mick thought for a second or 2 and says, "Leave that to me. We need some kind o' fancy stragety."

O' course, Perbidge talked about this and that for another long wile, but he couldn't make no decision on his own. Before he said yest or no he looked to his girl Rosie. Rosie didn't care if Two Bits clumb into the ring with a Jovian flameworm or her great-aunt Elsie. "It's a welterweight, ain't it?" she says.

"Yes," I says.

"Then Jendin will knock its block off." I and Mick declined to tell her that flameworms come generally without no blocks a tall.

We had 3 more weeks till the fight with Kid Jupiter but Two Bits didn't hardly need no more work. He was sluggin' the heavy bag and rattlin' the speed bag and bustin' his sparrin' partners like he was already champ. Nobody said much about Jovian flameworms and slowly but surely the day o' the fight come closer. You remember old pal how the bout was moved from the Civic Gym to the St. Bernard Auditorium on account of all the interest in our boy goin' up against a Jovian flameworm. None o' that made Perbidge nervous. I think that's when Mick and I decided we really liked this kid 'cause he he didn't scare none or else he was plain bug nuts.

Mick said he was goin' to think up a stragety for our boy but ½ hour before the bout he still hadn't come up with nothin'. We was gettin' Two Bits dressed an' I was rubbin' his arms off when Rosie come in to wisht him luck. She was no bear for looks but I guess lots o' guys could of went for her when they got to know her some. Two Bits was wearin' maroon trunks with a white stripe and Rosie wanted to know what Kid Jupiter was wearin'. Didn't none of us know and I don't think we care to much neither. Rosie kist her boy and told him she'd be back after the fight with all the money. I guess she was bettin' all they had but I couldn't say on Perbidge or the worm.

"Well," says Two Bits, "you said you was goin' to give me a secret plan so's I don't get kilt by this worm."

Mick gave him a smile and says a lot o' nothin' about keepin' his guard up and not lettin' Kid Jupiter have no openin'. Our boy knowed real fast that Mick didn't have no plan a tall. Perbidge started his yammerin', goin' on about how Mick was sendin' him help-

less into the ring against some kind o' creature which didn't care if Perbidge got kilt or not or wouldn't know the difference. Two Bits talked and talked till they was only a minute before it was time to leave the locker room.

"All I cay say," says Mick, "is they has got to be a way to beat 'em. Even flameworms don't live forever."

"They don't?" ast Perbidge.

"Well," says Mick, "I guess they do."

They come for us and we beat it out o' there through the tunnel and up into the crowd. Everybody in the place was cheerin' for Two Bits and I don't think the worm had a friend in the crowd 'cep' for Dugel hisself. Our boy clumb in through the ropes and I and Mick went with him and we plunked him down in his corner and started in to workin' him up. Mick gave him advice and I rubbed his neck and shoulders.

Then they was a big yell and I seen the flameworm and Dugel comin' up the isle. They wasn't nobody happy to see the worm and they all hooted when Kid Jupiter had trouble gettin' through the ropes. Them worms can squinch theyself into any shape they want, and Kid Jupiter was walkin' on 2 short legs as big around as sewer pipe, with 2 long arms with boxin' gloves on the ends and not much of a head to speak of. Dugel had a pair o' green trunks on it with a yella stripe.

Some fella innerduced them and they was a big cheer when he says, "From Springfield's own 9th Ward, wearin' maroon trunks an' weighin' 144 pounds, our own Jendin "Two Bits" Perbidge." They yelled and screamed and maybe they would of never settled down 'cep' the fella turned to Kid Jupiter and then they wasn't nobody much interested.

The referee called the fighters to the middle o' the ring and give 'em the rules. Two Bits touched gloves with Kid Jupiter and come back to the corner. "It give me a shiver just to touch him," he says. Then the bell rung and they was at it.

I'll give Perbidge the nod for looks. He got out there and started circlin' the flameworn and bobbin' and weavin' right out o' the book. Kid Jupiter just stood there and waited for Two Bits to bring the fight to him. I and Mick knowed that was the bunk. The only chanct our boy got was to stay away from the worm. But if Perbidge didn't start nothin' they wasn't nothin' goin' to get started, 'cause Kid Jupiter was to dumb to know he was in a fight. So the referee says somethin' to Two Bits and the boy says somethin' back and moves in on Kid Jupiter. The worm put up his dukes and even though they was worm's dukes I and Mick was worried about our boy.

Two Bits scored the 1st point, a terrible uppercut to the body that ought to of flattened the Kid but nothin' come of it. Two Bits danced back a bit and watched. The worm follered him round and jabbed with its straight right. It done that 'cause to a Jovian

flameworm it don't make no difference if it leads with its right or left. Perbidge busted it a few in the body and swung a left hook at its knobby little head. Even though our boy hit a couple o' good ones it didn't bother the worm none. A Jovian flamethrower can shake off a hurt in 4 or 5 seconds. They was some more dancin' and then the 1st round come to an end.

"It's like punchin' a paper sack full o' ice cream," says Two Bits. I was flappin' a towel to cool him off and Mick was rubbin' the boy's arms.

"If you stay out o' his way for 10 rounds," says Mick, "you're goin' to win on points for sure."

"I couldn't face my pa if I don't give it all I got," says Two Bits.

"Now I know you got the nerve," I says.

Our boy kept talkin' about how he got to fight so as his pa would know he was no lily liver. Two Bits talked till the bell rung. Kid Jupiter come out o' his corner and the referee was callin' Perbidge out and still he talked, right into Round 2. If you remember old pal, Round 2 was all the worm's. It was a awful round, a specially 'cause Two Bits catched one blow after another and he didn't never stop conversin'. I don't think Kid Jupiter was payin' much attention and I know the referee didn't care nothin', and I and Mick couldn't hear good but Perbidge didn't clam up just the same.

Kid Jupiter whammed him good in the stumach and then hit him again so hard Two Bits ought to of set down and thought the hole thing over but he didn't. The worm cut off the ring and Perbidge didn't have nowheres to go. He kept his gloves in front o' his pan and Kid Jupiter whammed him in the stumach again. Two Bits dropped his hands and Kid Jupiter walloped him on the chin.

"The Kid sure fixed up his map that time," says Mick.

When the flameworm started in on Two Bits, his girl Rosie came up to where we was. "What's he doin' in there?" she ast.

"He's givin' your boy a beatin', girlie," says Mick.

That wasn't what Rosie ast a tall. "What's Jendin doin'?" she says.

"He's yappin', what else/" I says.

It looked to me that Two Bits hardly knowed where he was, and Kid Jupiter was fixin' to wham him good but the bell rung. Mick ought not to of went out there to bring Perbidge back to the corner 'cause that was my job, but Mick was worried sick.

"I never seen nothin' like this Kid Jupiter," says Two Bits. "Can't Foyg nor any man stand up to me when I am right. You hit this worm and his skin turns green for a wile and then it's like you never hit him a tall. And if you bust him in the stumach it don't do no good and if you bust him in the head it don't do no good neither. I hope you got that secret idear ready 'cause if you don't we're goin' to be in big trouble. This Kid Jupiter is plenty tough and then

some. You better tell me what to do or I ain't lastin' here only another round."

"Say, kid," says Mick, "I got the idear right here."

"Well, what is it?" says our boy. I wanted to hear it to.

"What you got to do is keep after him. I saw in the 1st round before you set up as Kid's punchin' bag that every time you busted him he went green. If you bust him real fast again he turned greener. Try bustin' him one two three and don't let up and we will see what happens. Maybe they's a limit to how fast he can shake it off."

Perbidge would rather of kissed Mick than lissen to his idear. "You want I should clinch with the worm and wham him?" he says.

"Wham him good," says Mick.

The bell rung for Round 3 and Two Bits got Kid Jupiter in the middle o' the ring. First thing I seen is our boy in close and wham he busted the Kid in the body. The worm went green. Wham went Perbidge and the worm went greener. Wham wham wham. The flameworm looked like he ought to of went somewheres to get sick. He was the color o' the stuff that floats on the top o' Lake Lee. But Perbidge didn't stop. Wham wham wham. Two Bits keeps bustin' the worm till I and Mick knowed Mick was right. He was supprised 'cause he didn't hardly think what he said would of really worked. Kid Jupiter wobbled around and then bam he's down and the hole place was yellin' and screamin' like they was little flameworms eatin' everybody in the cheap seats.

Rosie was smilin' and Mick was laughin' but I was worried on acount o' Two Bits was still in the middle o' the ring makin' a speech to the referee. He was probily tellin' about how this was all Mick's idear and all the credit should ought to go to Mick and what not. O' course this ain't by far the 1st Long Count in boxin' history but it was the only one I knowed that was a specially nuts. Mick figgered Two Bits trimmed the worm and he wasn't appresiatin' what was happenin', 'cause he was still cellabratin' with Rosie. The referee was pushin' Perbidge towards the nutral corner but our boy got to talk. The flameworm got overloaded or somethin' but it didn't take only 15 seconds and Kid Jupiter was back up ready to go. Two Bits was still goin' on and the referee looked to give it up. Now Mick seen what happened and he don't say nothin', he just looked madder'n a bee on a hot iron. The referee seperated Two Bits and Kid Jupiter and then they went at it again. First thing wham the flameworm knocked Perbidge down and ought to of layed him out for the night but Two Bits is just as dumb as the worm and all so don't know when he is hurt. Then the bell rung and I guess you thought you could of kist your 5 hundred good-by.

It was a uphill battle for Two Bits just then, Mick said that he should of

stood with bustin' Kid Jupiter till the flameworm gone down again, but Perbidge come back with the information that he was seein' stars and hurtin' from Round 3, but our hero as you might call him was strong enough to talk us into the ground so as we were glad when the bell rung again to start Round 4. "If he loses to a damn worm then won't nobody give him another fight," says Rosie and I guess she knowed what she was talkin' about. We watched Two Bits come up to Kid Jupiter to bust him like Mick said, but the flameworm gave him a wallop on the chin and Perbidge went down. Dugel give a loud whistle and didn't have no trouble gettin' the Kid to go to a corner. Mick looked sick and Rosie turned away but I seen our boy jawin' with the referee and I knowed he was O.K. When the count got to 8 Perbidge got up and shaked his head. The sap ought to of stayed away till the end o' the round but he went in on the Kid and the worm give him another wallop and the bell rung. We went out to collect our boy and drug him back to the corner.

"You want I should throw in the towel?" I ast but Mick says no.

"Jendin," says his girl Rosie, "I don't hardly think I can marry nobody that loses to a worm."

"And you ain't goin' to neither," says Mick. Then it was Round 5 and Two Bits knowed what he got to do. He all most run acrost the ring and give Kid Jupiter a swell wallop and the worm went all over green. Wham Perbidge give him another and wham another still. Two Bits busted that flameworm 1 after another till the Kid got as green as the Springfield dome. Our boy hit him with uppercuts again and plop the worm went to the canvas. This time Two Bits shuts hisself up long enough to go to a nutral corner.

"1, 2, 3," says the referee and the flameworm was healing fast.

"4, 5, 6," goes the count and the green was fadin' and Dugal was yellin' to Kid Jupiter to git to his feet.

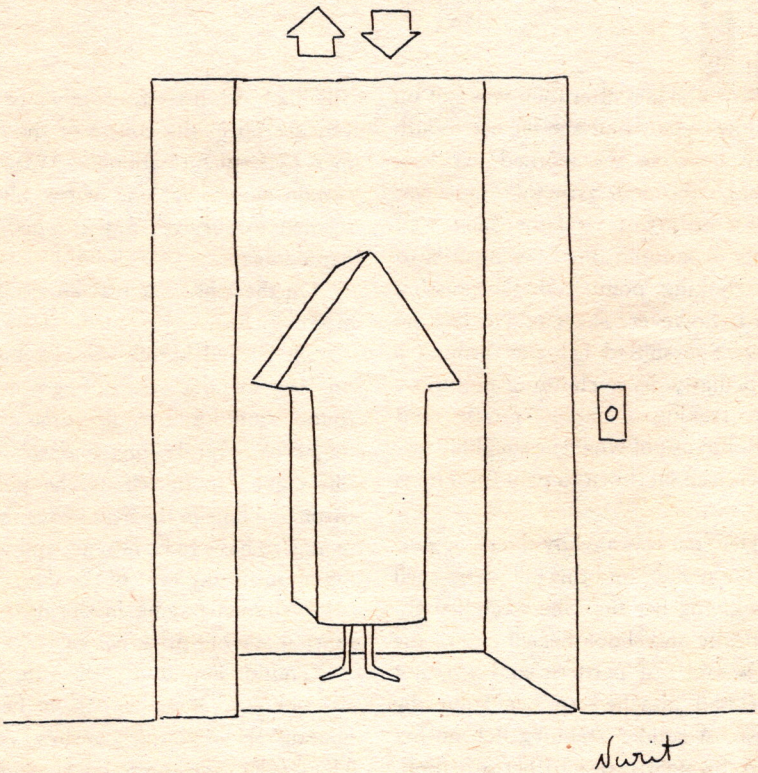
"7, 8, 9, 10, Your out!" Everybody in the place screamed and our boy Perbidge is a winner by a knockout. His girl Rosie run out and give her boy a hug and kiss. Mick breathed easy and I was pretty happy myself. Then Kid Jupiter was all right and got up and shook hands with Two Bits and I seen it give the boy a shiver all though he ought to of been used to it by then.

We had a wingding afterwards in a place acrost from our hotel and Dugel and Kid Jupiter come up to us. "You know you ought to buy me a drink," says Dugel, " 'cause oncet you knowed my boy's secret they won't never be no more Jovian flameworms in the boxin' game. You have ruint me."

I and Mick laughed at that. "You won't never be ruint," says Mick. "Not as long as they is 1 fighter left that will lay down for 50 big ones."

Dugel got a kick out o' that to. He had a drink with us and they brang Kid Jupiter a awful lookin' bowl o' somethin' and he slurpt it all up. All of us 'cep' Dugel won a pile o' money and we had a great party, a specially as how every time Two Bits looked like he was goin' to start yammerin' his girl Rosie kist him on the mouth to shut him up.

Two Bits wasn't lyin' when he said can't no other man lick him when he's right. Now we are goin' to Peachtree to find out about this great Suzavod. Our boy is in swell shape so if the great Suzavod ain't worse'n a Jovian flameworm I guess you will hear soon that Perbidge is the new welter champ o' the universe. And if you don't put no more'n 5 hundred on our boy then you are as cheap as they say.



This is the first fiction sale for Mr. Mackay, who writes that he has been reading sf since he was twelve and writing it almost as long. A graduate of Georgetown University, the author is presently serving in the Navy, as a petty officer on board the USS Blue Ridge, home-ported in Yokosuka, Japan.

Demon Lover

BY

M. SARGENT MACKAY

The late afternoon was hot on Willow's coat, and she let her mouth hang open as she worked her way through the undergrowth. There was almost no breeze, and the thick, rich odors of autumn filled her nostrils to the choking point. Of the missing ward, however, she could detect no trace. She sniffed her way around a particularly dense clump of multiflora rose, reeking of rabbit, mouse, and fowl, but not of what she sought. Frustrated, she sat down to pant for a minute.

Her coat was already thickening up for the winter, and this fall warm spell was giving her fits. She scratched energtically and shook herself free of the twigs and leaf particles and whatnot that had attached to her from the brush. A sudden stabbing itch on her flank brought a flea to her attention, but she hunted for it without success. She had rid herself of most of last year's crop in the course of the summer, by frequent bathing and eating of certain plants, but one or two always seemed to survive. She stopped and panted again.

On the whole, it was an irritating afternoon.

She picked herself up and started on; the missing ewe had got to be found, stupid and troublesome as she might be, ever lagging and straying. She cursed to herself as she pushed through a hole in the next hedge. Maddening to have to be moving and hunting about in the heat of the day.

A sudden baying in the near distance made her prick her ears.

"Found! Found! By the run, near six willows, hung up in a hedge. Found!" Her young cousin's voice. Thankfully, she threw back her head and bayed a response. Then she turned

and started for the run.

When she came to the place the third searcher, her uncle Quailflusher, had already got there, and was investigating the ewe in the hedge. The youngster, Grabchuck, greeted her with enthusiasm. He was a five-year-old, only recently graduated to watch-standing status, and was bubbling over with his success.

"She's hung up pretty badly," he said. "I tried to get her out, but she bleated so, I thought I'd better wait."

Quailflusher growled from the hedge, "Help me here, Willow. Her leg's caught." Willow shouldered into the hedge. "Just put a foot there...." He braced himself, seized the ward by the rump, and with a sharp jerk of his head yanked her leg free of the prisoning branch. The old ewe sprawled out on the grass, complaining prodigiously. Grabchuck nosed her and pushed her back on her feet. She bleated with pain and limped a couple of steps, holding her near hind leg up under her at a funny angle. It was scratched and bleeding. Quailflusher sniffed at it suspiciously.

"Broken," he declared. He sat back on his haunches and looked at the ewe with disgust.

Willow considered. "How old is she? She didn't lamb this year."

"Last year, either," Quailflusher said. "I don't know. She must be as old as I am. Too old, I guess." The three wardens sat and watched, their tongues lolling. Grabchuck offered no opinion, awaiting his elder's decision. The ewe hobbled a couple of steps, stopped, and cropped grass.

Quailflusher sighed, "Well, she can still walk, a bit. You can take her on back to camp, Grabchuck, and don't run her off her legs on the way. If she gives out before you get there, you'll have to drag her the rest of the way."

"Right." Grabchuck started up, collected the ewe, and headed her downstream in the direction of camp. The two older wardens sat and watched him out of sight. Quailflusher scratched his ear thoughtfully.

"That old ewe's been around as long as I can remember, and she was always troublesome," he observed.

"She'll eat tough," said Willow.

Quailflusher flicked an ear in agreement. He rose and scratched, then lifted a leg and marked the hedge where the ewe had been. Willow rolled briskly in the grass, then jumped up suddenly and plunged into the run. A moment later Quailflusher joined her, and they romped and splashed through the pools of the swift-flowing run, getting soaked to the skin.

"Ah, that's good," Willow said, shaking herself vigorously. "I can't believe the heat, so late in the season."

"Aye." The air stirred faintly; scarcely a breeze, but they sighed thankfully. Quailflusher stretched luxuriously. Willow watched him from the corner of her eye, admiring the smooth play of muscles. Quailflusher was nine, a young dog warden in the

prime of his life. He saw her and grinned, then sniffed a couple of times, suggestively.

She looked away, embarrassed. "We'd better be getting back to our sections," she said. She stood up and started off down the run. Quailflusher followed, and they trotted along in silence. A klick or so farther on they parted company to find their sections.

Willow had left hers in a protected pasture, between two treetopped hillocks, partly hedged with dense rose. They had got pretty well scattered in her absence, and she must spend an hour or so routing them out of the bushes. The sun was setting fast by that time, and she headed them down to rejoin the main flock in the night pasture.

Her second cousin, Killed-a-Savage, relieved her, and they exchanged greeting sniffs. "Hot damn!" he exclaimed. Willow snarled at him in irritation. He laughed rudely. "If you want any meat, you'd better get back to camp," he said. "It was half gone when I left. And I think Grandmother will have some advice for you...."

Willow offered him some advice of her own and started back to camp in a huff. Her blood was definitely stirring, despite the season, and her emotions unsettled; she needed no commentary from males who were forbidden in any case. She was seven years old, in the full flush of youth, and she knew herself beautiful. In spring she would choose a mate, and herd with his band thereafter. There was a certain one in the Rock Hill clan — handsome, smart, a beautiful voice — she permitted her mind to wander till she got back to camp.

The warm smells of camp greeted her as she came up in the dark, the close smell of her kinfolk, each clearly individual, yet adding up to the definite, ineffable whiff of her own band. Food smells mixed withal: pheasant (fresh feathers scattered before the cave), 'possum, fresh-killed sheep. Smoke whuffed in her face from the small fire sheltered by the overhang; her great-aunt greeted her where she lay tending it.

"Hey, Willow." Quailflusher's voice, his scent rank and close. "We saved you some of the meat."

"Thanks, Quail." She took the meat (a sizable chunk of shoulder; Quailflusher was always good to her) and lay down with it against the wall.

The faint sounds and smells of the others informed her as she ate. Younglings squeaked and tumbled about in the dark, her elder sister's two from this spring and her first cousin's three yearlings. The mothers conversed in low tones. Grandmother and Grandfather, of course; at thirty-two, Grandfather didn't go out much. Grandmother Starfall, who was five years younger, had been running the clan for years. In camp her word was law; she was versed in the lore of her folk, and ruled the female rites and mysteries. Quailflusher was in a corner with his

mate, and two or three off-duty bachelors lolled in the back of the cave. They were stirring about somewhat, and she realized that the atmosphere in the cave was becoming tense. She must be further along than she thought. She gnawed thoughtfully on the scapula, finding the last few bits of gristle.

A rustling, and Grandmother lay down beside her. She sniffed Willow's face politely but curtly. Willow waited, apprehensive.

"You've come in," said Grandmother bluntly. Her voice was soft, but quite firm.

"Not yet ... not entirely...."

"Close enough." Grandmother was exasperated. "Listen to those oafs fidgeting back there." Willow turned her head away, though the gesture was not visible in the dark. "We don't need this. Your cousin Crawfish-Bit-Her is barely out, and your own mother came in the day before yesterday."

"My mother!" Willow was startled.

"Yes, surely. She let me know she would hunt alone for a few days, like a sensible creature, instead of hanging about camp getting the males all stirred up to no purpose." She paused significantly.

"I'm sorry, Grandmother. Perhaps I should go and keep her company."

"By all means, if she'll have you. She may really want to be alone."

"Did she say where she would hunt?"

"Along the river." Grandmother was silent for a moment. "Fall heats are sent by devils. Winterborn are a drain on the band, and unlucky besides. There was a winterbirth when I was eight, I don't say to whom, in a hard winter, too. Three younglings, none lived to be five. One died of some curse before a year. One was drowned, playing the fool. The last lived to stand watch. A lion came in the dusk, and he gave his life for the band. That was Stonetumble. He was brave, but unlucky."

"I'm sorry, Grandmother. I must have neglected some rite." Willow was suitably impressed.

"Three fall heats ... and last year there were none. The devils are after us for sure. When you get back we'll have purifications, as many as necessary. If we can't ward them off, it'll be a rough winter." She breathed quietly, her mind full of ritual. "I'd better purify the camp, too, as soon as you leave."

"I'm sorry, Grandmother. I'll leave tonight." Willow rose.

"Well, you can leave in the morning. It's warm out. Sleep downwind of camp, it'll be all right." Grandmother rose also. "Time to sing, soon," she commented, in a louder tone. Murmurs of acknowledgment came from the others. "Go ahead, dear," she added, nosing Willow gently in the side. Willow went out.

The night air was pleasantly cool, and a light breeze had come up. It ruffled her coat slightly. She went and lay down on a rock break, a little way downwind of the cave. After a while

she heard the others come out and walk about, stretching their muscles and getting ready for the evening's activities. One of her aunts arrived from the pasture, and two of the bachelors left to go on watch. A fox barked, and Willow twitched her ears.

Off to the west a savage began to sing, his characteristic yapping call. He sang the glory of the evening; he sang of his wit and craft in the hunt; he sang the death of prey and the taste of hot blood. His mate joined him, and the shriller voices of his whelps (seven of them; savages were prolific). Willow curled her lip contemptuously; savages knew only one song. They were puny creatures, crafty enough in their way, but no match for a warden. They would steal lambs if they got the chance, but they hadn't the wit to keep flocks of their own; so they lived short, harsh lives, and produced enough whelps to make up the difference.

On the tail of the savage's song came the full, deep bass of her great-uncle, Bearbait. He was fifteen, a House warden, one of the leading males of Sugar Hill, and acknowledged the best songster. He sang the glory of the evening; he sang the beneficence of the Masters and the strength and wealth of the clan. He sang of the peaceful flocks and the loyalty and resolution of the wardens of duty, whom he enumerated with all their names and styles. He sang death, death to sneaking, thieving savages, death to lions, death to bears and devilish wolverines. At each pause in his song the rest of the clan, wherever they watched, lifted their voices in chorus of affirmation.

Other voices joined from other clans, and when Bearbait ended his song he was answered from the south, the voice of Snake-magic, cantor of the Rock Hill clan. The singing went on for quite some time, up and down the valley, singing the joys of life, the puissance of different clans, the deeds of heroes and the destruction of enemies. Willow's mind was filled to ecstasy with the magic of song and moon and night and the subtle chemistry working in her own body. The last notes died out in the distant southwest, and Willow sighed deeply, limp with emotion.

The night was still. Even the crickets were temporarily quelled by the wardens' song. Then, far to the north, the notes of a strange song rent the silence, bringing every warden to his feet, hackles erect and shivering. It struck Willow like the memory of a dream, incomprehensible, yet on the edge of understanding; unfamiliar, yet like something remembered from long ago. She shivered convulsively as the song rose and fell and finally died down to quivering silence. The silence continued for a moment and then was broken by Quailflusher's voice, startlingly loud.

"*What was that?*" A pause. "Grandfather?"

"I never heard the like in all my days." Grandfather was definite.

"It sounded almost like a warden,

but...." Willow's sister trailed off.

"It was a devil!" Grandmother declared fiercely. "A mocking devil! A creature of wind and ice! It's come to mock and torment us!" Her voice shook with rage and fear. "I knew it was coming! I've felt it for weeks! A devil, coming closer!"

"Grandmother, what will we do?" Willow's cousin whined.

"Purifications!" declared Grandmother. "Exorcisms!" And she began to sing, a song of exorcism against devils. Willow sank down and put her chin on the rock. Her heart beat wildly, fueling strange thoughts and feelings that raced and churned in her brain. When Grandmother finished singing, Willow got up and trotted into the night, headed east, toward the river.

Mostly, Jake found the going easier beside the highway. The hard top, or what had been the hard top, was broken and tumbled, great chunks of it at crazy angles, weeds and brush growing riotously up and around and over. Enormous chuckholes held pools of dubious water; on the high shoulders washouts had created canyonlike gullies. But along the edge a trail ran, fairly straight, skirting the bad parts, and Jake followed it gratefully, even hopefully. It might be only a game trail. It was probably only a game trail. But the hope remained, and led him onward, as it had since the girl died.

The trail plunged into a dense stand of thistles, and the branches swatted him as the little bay mare pushed her way through. They emerged into an open space, an intersection, he realized after a moment. Another four-laner had crossed here, headed east-west. Traces of ruins marked the corners, almost swallowed by the earth; a red fox sat on a mound and watched him curiously. In the median strip to the west, the remains of an overhead sign framework were piled in a tangled heap. That seemed familiar ... it had been a long time, but the place jogged his memory. He rode over and dismounted. The sign was made of some heavy plastic; the phosphorescent letters were still legible after God-knew-how-long.

Route 50W, it said. Winchester.

Good. His destination was not much farther, then, just five or ten klicks on south. He did have a destination, for a change. He had come through the Shenandoah Valley some twenty years earlier, and guested for several months at a sizable freehold near here. There had been nearly thirty people, in an ancient walled compound, still keeping the buildings up, growing vegetables and herding cattle and sheep. There had been several such freeholds in the valley then. It was a sheltered area, high enough to be safe from the encroaching ocean, protected from the northern blast by the Alleghanies. The City had never quite engulfed it back in the old days; as the

City receded, the bluegrass pastures and tangled woodlots were left comparatively unharmed. When five years of searching found no human life in what had once been New York and Pennsylvania, he had remembered the Blue Ridge, and turned to the south.

A couple of klicks south of Route 50, a side road branched off through the tree-shrouded ruins of a small village. All traces of hard-top had vanished from what had never been more than a minor local road, but the dense growth of shade trees kept the undergrowth down. Presently the trail emerged into the meadowland again. Jake eyed the occasional tumbledown farmhouse they passed, but saw no signs of life. Once a small herd of ponies threw up their heads in astonishment and then galloped away with their tails in the air. Once he heard a bull bellowing in the near distance. The country was peaceful, even friendly; there were few of the unsightly bare patches where nothing would grow, which in some areas covered hectares on end. Here the thistle and burdock ruled over man's remains.

The road had disappeared entirely, but a faint trail remained, skirting the patches of woods and winding among the rock breaks. Once he heard a dog howl, or perhaps a coyote. At the crest of the next hill he reined in, for there it was, less than a kilometer away: a grove of trees on top of a hill, strongly walled around, with a red roof showing through the branches. A thin column of smoke rose from one of the chimneys.

People! For a moment he could only sit. To hear human voices again, to sit beneath a sound roof, by a warm hearthside ... again he heard a howl, closer, and glancing down the hill, he saw an excessively large dog coming toward him at a rapid trot, with two others coming behind. He looked round. Three more were converging from the surrounding fields. Wardens, he thought, shortening the reins; he had forgotten they kept wardens. The mare stamped and tossed her head. Jake quieted her and waited as the wardens closed to about five meters. The one before him advanced a few steps and barked a sharp query.

"Sorry," Jake said. The sound of his voice startled him. These days he seldom had reason to speak. "I don't understand warden talk too well. I've come from up north." He pointed behind him. The warden seemed to be following well enough. "Ah, I guested here, a long time ago. Maybe your masters will take me in again." He gestured toward the opposite hill. The warden came forward slowly, sniffed warily at his boot, starting back as the mare stamped nervously, then at a proffered hand. He looked up and met Jake's calm stare. Jake sighed and looked off at the beckoning rooftops, then back to the warden. The warden turned in that direction and bayed, then sat back expectantly.

Jake detected motion at the top of

the compound wall. A moment later an answering howl echoed across the hollow. The warden seemed satisfied, dismissed his fellows with a growl, and gestured for Jake to follow him. They trotted down the hill, through the run at the bottom, and up toward the gate.

A big man of roughly Jake's own years stood by it cradling a crossbow. They regarded each other slowly.

"Big John Hawkins," Jake said presently.

The big man nodded slowly. "Jake Evans. Long time no see." He let the crossbow droop, glanced at Jake's escort. "O.K., Bearbait. We know him."

The warden headed back down the hill to whatever duties awaited him. Jake dismounted and shook Hawkins' hand.

"Well, John Hawkins, I ain't seen a human face in five years, and it's a real pleasure to see yourn now." His voice sounded hollow to him, almost forced.

Hawkins chuckled. "Well, Jake, I never expected to see yourn again, for sure. Come on in." Jake followed him, leading his mare.

And yet a few minutes, and Jake sat at table in the big house kitchen, with meat and drink before him and dozens of his kind around him. He applied himself to his food, less from hunger than to escape speech. The Hawkinses sat quietly, drinking him in, their ages from about fourteen to indeterminately old. A thirtyish woman replenished his cup and plate until he gestured, no more. He sat back and regarded them, and they him, a moment longer before old Mr. Hawkins spoke.

"Well, Mr. Evans, what did you find up north?"

"Fewer people and more moose ... and lately ain't no people at all. I was living with a gal up there and her pa, hunting, mostly." He paused, looked out the window. "She died, though, 'bout five year ago, and the old man followed her pretty soon. I been travelin' ever since." He looked around at the Hawkinses. "Plenty of game now. I lived by hunting a long time." He glanced about again, still strange to the sight and sound of people. They looked at him with equal wonder.

"There's few enough here," Old Man Hawkins observed. "Not so many's when you were here last. Not so many left in the valley now. Them Dakerses live down in Fort Valley, down on Massanutten, but we don't see them but once or twice a year. Old Max Wilder still has a place over in the pine hills. He's right old now, ain't got no family left. Some folks down around Luray, I guess, but we don't hardly ever see them. You're the first we seen in quite a spell."

"Looks like there were more of you-all when I came through here twenty year ago. Hope there ain't been no sickness." Jake filled a pipe from a canister on the table. Big John's wife poked a splinter in the stove to light it for him.

There had been sickness, and hard winters, and other forms of attrition,

and the telling of it went on into the evening. There were too few births and too many deaths. A few youth, adventurous or angry, had departed for the south. The rest stayed, each year a little fewer. In the north Jake had found occasional traces of men, but none living. He suspected that some lived in the great eastern marshes, but he had seen none. A few solitary hunters, outlaws, or ascetics might still wander the northern forest. If other men lived, it was to the south.

"At least we ain't gone hungry." Big John Hawkins occupied his hands with carving the figure of a bullock from a block of wood. "We got more critters than we know what to do with."

"Them wardens are right smart," Jake said.

"Hell, yeah," old Mr. Hawkins said. "They're most as smart as you or I."

"They raise more sheep than we can shear," Big John said, with the pleasure all farmers take in talking dogs. "Even in bad winters we don't lose much stock. They keep the lion and bear out of this piece of country, too."

"Sugar Hill wardens are the best in the valley," said a younger Hawkins. "Listen at them sing." Through the fall darkness they heard the voices of the wardens lifting and falling up and down the valley.

"How many you-all have?" Jake asked in wonder.

"I don't rightly know," John Hawkins said.

The younger Hawkins muttered to himself for a moment, then said, "I reckon there's about twenty-three couple watching sheep, and maybe fifteen couple or so on cattle. And must be ten or a dozen hang around the house here. That's not counting young and such. Good many, I reckon. Made a rough count at shearing, but I reckon I missed some."

"We always had wardens at Sugar Hill. Had some of the first they ever was." John spoke reflectively. "Guess we didn't need them so much in the old days. Sure do need them now." The pipe passed, its glow a feeble echo of the candle guttering on the table. For a moment they sat quietly, listening to the voices of the wardens. The moon was well up now, and presently a shaft of moonlight struck through the kitchen window.

"Ain't that fine," said the younger Hawkins.

Outside, the singing slowly tapered off. There was a long silence, broken by a new and different song. The Hawkinses stirred and exclaimed. Jake listened a minute, then smiled.

"Two nights now," Big John said, shaking his head. "Coming closer."

Jake chuckled. The Hawkinses stared at him.

"Looks like I ain't the only lone wolf to come up the valley these two days," he said.

* * *

In fact, the wolf had been in the valley four nights. He had hunted the previous winter with a large pack in western New York, the pack he was born to. Hunting was good these days, and wolves ranged where for centuries there had been none. The range was crowded. The winter band at some points numbered over twenty, and interwolf tensions increased. The young wolf found no mate in the season, and when spring came and the pack split up to its various dens, he headed south and spent the summer exploring the Poconos. He had never met a man, and the ruins and wastes that dotted the fields and forest he regarded as irrelevant anomalies. Game was plentiful, and the wolf lived fat. When autumn came he was still moving south, and thus all unwittingly paralleled Jake's course into the valley.

He heard the songs at great distance the first night, and listened in puzzlement. The second night he gave tongue to answer the strangers, singing of the north and his summer roving. He could not understand the reply, but he detected a note of hostility. The fourth night found him within the Sugar Hill warden's range, and he sniffed their markers with fascination. He inferred a diet consisting largely of sheep, and in an outlying pasture found sign of astonishing numbers of that animal, less than a day old. Again that night he answered the strange songs. This time the hostility in the reply was unmistakable, and the wolf thought it well to withdraw outside the warden's range marks, which he annointed to establish his presence in the neighborhood.

Through the night he lay up in a rock break somewhat to the northeast, listening to the watch signals. They continued tantalizingly just beyond the edge of meaning. The wolf knew the cry of coyote and feral dog; he had met and dealt with both in the past, and considered himself their superior. The discovery of a strange canid of unprecedented size and unknown capabilities astonished him, and piqued his curiosity.

The night waned, and presently becoming hungry, the wolf set off to explore the new range. In the pallor of approaching dawn, he started a weanling fawn. In ten paces he pulled it down, and as three or four other deer fled crashing through the brush, he feasted on soft meat. He lay up for some hours near the kill; in the late afternoon he set off once more, and toured the wardens' boundaries for several kilometers toward the river, marking them himself as he went. Once he concealed himself downwind of a trail, and observed in silent wonder as a trio of wardens escorted a small drove of cattle down to water in a run, and then away again. Their size was impressive, and their watchfulness and smooth interaction more so. The wolf was thoughtful as he went his way.

The markers tended south again after a distance, and the wolf veered

off to follow a run downstream. Once he started a rabbit, and chased it a few dozen meters for the sake of the exercise before it vanished into a thicket of rose. Well away from the wardens' boundary, he found himself in almost a playful mood, agreeably stimulated by the experience. He splashed in the run, pounced after fluttering leaves, dashed across a meadow and back to the run. In a few minutes he was panting; the musty odors of fall exhilarated him. A fresh scent impinged: a marker! His nose sought it out in a rock break. Yes, fresh ... less than three hours old. He sniffed incredulously. The scent was not so alien as to conceal its message. A young bitch warden. And, no matter that it was still fall, no matter that the first snows were yet a moon or more away, unmistakably in season. With a new sense of purpose, the wolf started on, following her trail.

Jake spent the morning riding with John Hawkins and his two sons, escorted by three couple of big wardens. They made a round of the flocks and sections, prepared to assist the wardens with any problems that might have arisen. None had. As they visited each section, the warden on watch would come up and accompany them, conversing with the house wardens, then usually addressing itself to Hawkins's younger son, Delbert, for a moment. Jake felt a growing sense of superfluity.

"Looks like them wardens would get on pretty well without no people around at all," he remarked.

Big John laughed. His elder son, Ace, smiled and said, "Some of them do."

"Yeah?"

"Some clans," Delbert said. "They graze farther to south. Some clans we don't see from one year to the next."

"Be wardens raising stock all up and down the valley in another few years." Ace filled his pipe as they rode along. "Naw, they don't need us. They stick by us, though. Even them out clans come by once a year at least. Bring us a few head from their herd. Sort of like a gift or something."

"The Masters' share," Delbert said. The others glanced at him. "Like in them old stories," he elaborated. "They think we're like gods or something, you know, they bring us the best from their herds."

"Well, they git stuff from us, too. Blankets and tanned sheepskins and such." John Hawkins evinced skepticism. "And we doctor them when they need it."

"Shit," said Delbert. "They don't need no blankets. They know we done made them to work for us, and they still remember it even if they ain't enough people to go around now. You heard old Moonsong, she knows all them old warden stories. Listen to her sometime, you'll learn something."

"Well, I'm just glad they stick by us, whyever."

Jake pulled up to ride abreast of Delbert. "How do you talk to them so easy?" he asked. "I cain't hardly understand ary thing they say."

"Why, I just listen to them." Delbert looked startled. "They mouths ain't shaped like ourn, so 'course they cain't talk like we do. I guess I just always been around them, so I know what they sayin'."

"But they tell stories and all?"

"Shit, yeah." Delbert spat to the off side. "Them old wardens know more stories — and they know magic, and hexes — shoot, they know a lot. Get old Moonsong to talk sometime. She's the oldest warden around, and she can tell you plenty."

"Well, I sure cain't understand them like you do. You'd have to tell me what she was sayin'."

"Sure, sure."

They crossed a shallow run. The ponies stepped daintily, wary of their footing, splashing quickly up the other bank. A range warden appeared from up the hill, paid his respects to Bearbait, then came up to Delbert's mare with something approaching awe. Del greeted him cheerfully by name, conversed briefly, then reached down to rumple his ears. Satisfied with this evidence of grace, the warden fell back to talk longer with Bearbait before returning to his section.

"How come they always come up to you?" Jake asked.

Del shrugged. "I dunno. I always liked them and spent time with them, and I can talk their way pretty good. They mostly understand people talk all right, but I like to talk warden talk, and I reckon they just like it."

Ace laughed, turning in his saddle. "Old Delbert spends so much time with them I reckon he's 'bout near half-warden by now."

Presently they stopped for lunch where the run was bridged by a large fallen willow tree. They had brought cold meat sandwiches from the house, which they garnished with cress from the run and washed down with a skin of cider. Several wardens appeared from the surrounding pastures, and they and the house wardens conferred in small, excited groups.

"What ails them wardens?" Big John said irritably.

Delbert laughed. "It's that old wolf we heard the last couple of nights. They think it's some kind of devil. Talkin' 'bout huntin' it tonight."

Jake felt a spasm of irritation. "That ain't no devil. Just a wolf. I seen plenty up north. Why don't they leave him be? He ain't done nothing."

"Scared of him," Delbert amplified. "They ain't never seen no wolf. They just know he's bigger than ary coyote, and strange, so they figure must be something wrong with it." He brushed the crumbs from his moustache. "I ain't never seen one, either. What's it doing here? Seems kinda funny, don't it?"

"Heard them old stories say a wolf can change hisself into a man sometimes," Ace said.

"Ah, bullshit," Big John said nervously.

"Anyway, he might steal sheep," Ace said.

"Not with them wardens watching them." Jake still felt irritated, as if he and the wolf somehow shared something. "He may be wild, but he ain't stupid. Tell them to leave him be till he does something." He stoked his pipe with a touch of vehemence and lit up.

Delbert shrugged, "You, Bearbait!" The hulking warden left his conference and came up. Delbert conversed with him in low tones.

"Maybe that's where all the people went," Ace suggested. "Up north. All done turned into wolves." He lay back, tilted his hat across his eyes.

Jake grunted. "All done moved south, and I should have done a long time ago."

"Get away from the ice," John Hawkins agreed. "Must be cities and everything on down south yet."

"Like to see a city someday," Ace mumbled from under his hat. "Might just go south myself, when I get set."

"When you get set," Delbert scoffed. Bearbait had returned to pass the word.

"What's you tell that critter?" Jake demanded.

"Ain't no critter, that's Bearbait," Delbert protested mildly. "I told him what you said."

"What'd he say?"

"Said that devil left his mark all around the north edge of the grazing. They want to kill it. I told him long as that devil don't steal stock or something, they can leave him be."

"How come you like wolves so much?" Ace lifted his hat slightly to peer at Jake.

Jake grunted around his pipestem. "They let me alone, I let them alone."

For a moment they sat silent. Presently Big John knocked his pipe against a rock and stood up. The ponies came to his whistle and shortly they rode on.

The wardens were not pleased with the directive from the Masters, and controversy bubbled in the camps all night. Quailflusher lay with his head to the fire and listened to his grandmother inveigh against the northling, the Masters' folly in tolerating its presence, and the supineness of the House wardens, her grandson Bearbait included. Bearbait had been there earlier in the evening, and there had been harsh words between him and his grandmother. Now Starfall was in a religious rage. Her opinion was known in the clans, and those of like mind had been drifting in all night to confer with her, or more exactly, to hear her speak. Her cause and her audience spurred her to new heights of eloquence, and exorcisms were heard that night that had not been sung since *her* grandmother's time. Quailflusher lay bemused while Starfall's voice rolled over him.

The fire itself entered his thoughts, itself the greatest of the Masters' benisons, the symbol of the bond be-

tween Master and warden since the first cur dog crept out of the woods to share a hunter's campfire. The fear of the stranger beat in Quailflusher's veins and warred with his reverence for the Masters. Could the All-wise be wrong? What reason could They have for protecting the demon? There had been no explanation, only the order. Hunt not the northling. Quailflusher had smelled the creature's markers himself; the strangeness was eerie, a smell of wildness, the wind, and the north. Quailflusher's hackles arose again at the thought. His stomach knotted.

"Quail." His second cousin, Grabchuck, sniffed his mask politely and lay down beside him. His discomfort showed in the set of his ears. "What do you think?"

Quailflusher sighed and rested his chin on his paws again. "I don't know, 'Chuck. Grandmother's older than anyone, almost. She knows the woods and flocks, she knows medicine and spirits. But...."

Grabchuck flicked an ear. "But Bearbait knows the Masters."

Quailflusher sighed again. "If it weren't Grandmother talking, I'd say let it go. We can't defy the Masters. We only watch the flocks, and do as the Masters bid us. That's why They made us. The devil is still north of the range. It hasn't acted yet, except to mock us. But Grandmother is so sure...."

"I wish it would do something! Then we'd know. But it just stays; it's like waiting for a storm in the summer." Sparks flew up as their great-aunt threw more sticks on the fire with a practiced toss of her head. Grabchuck dodged as a spark lit near him. "Listen, Quail, there's something else. The devil didn't sing tonight."

"So? We know he's out there. Some of Fisher's camp found a fawn he killed this morning."

"That's just it. He answered us before. Why not tonight? Look, Quail, have you forgotten about Willow? When she came under forbidding she went outrange to the east. What if the devil finds her?"

Quailflusher sat up. "Her mother is back. She smelled nothing to the east."

"But Fisher's people said the markers tended east. We've heard nothing from her. Shouldn't we be looking for her?"

"Impossible!" Quailflusher was shocked. "Go after her, when she's forbidden? Grandmother would have a fit!"

"But Willow may be in danger!" Grabchuck turned his head away embarrassedly. "In her present state of mind she can't be thinking clearly. Someone should investigate, at least make sure she's all right!"

"Look, quiet down." Quailflusher fought his own sense of unease. "Would your state of mind be any clearer if you were near her? It's easy to get worked up over a forbidden bitch, any young dog would. We know she's out there, we can imagine

her loneliness, we can feel her longing in our own. But it's forbidden, it's unlucky even to think of it! Fall heats are unlucky for everyone, and we've had three this fall in our camp alone. We've got to be especially careful at a time like this." He lay down again. "And besides," he added, "she's forbidden to you, anyway, or to anyone from our clan."

"The spirits smite me if I was thinking any such thing!" Grabchuck expostulated. "I'm worried about her!"

Quailflusher thought for a while. The whelp could be right; there was some danger. Willow was already under evil influences. With the devil at large, who knew what might happen? Well," he said. "I'll head over that way tomorrow when I'm off watch, check around for markers, see if I can get a whiff of something."

"I'll go, too," urged Grabchuck. "Better if two go ... because of the forbidding, I mean."

"I'll ask White Rabbit, too. We should have a bitch along."

Their grandmother's voice rose in a new exorcism, and was joined by the voices of her followers. After a moment Quail and Grabchuck joined in, too. The voices rose up, a great bell of sound before the moon.

In the house, a couple of kilometers away, Delbert sat by a window listening in rapture to the sound. The rest of the Hawkins clan sat or sprawled about the room, more or less oriented toward the fire. Some occupied themselves with small handiwork. A candle or two supplemented the fire with small puddles of flickering yellow light: in one of them Delbert's wife, Rida, pored over a large herbal. Conversation murmured desultorily. Wardens, cats, and cur dogs flopped about the floor and furniture. Jake sank deep in an armchair, a large cat in his lap. His eyes rested now on Delbert, now on one or another of the Hawkinses. He said little, and that only when spoken to. A deep disquiet fluttered somewhere in his belly, an unease he could not admit to, could scarcely identify. The soft voices of the others jarred strangely on his nerves. It was just people, he thought, after so long ... but he was used to being alone now. The people jarred on his presence. The fire was good, and the chair. He kneaded the cat's neck with his knuckles.

Delbert's cousin Little Earl stretched from his couch to pass Delbert the pipe. "Old wardens sure gettin' down tonight," he said, smoke rilling from his nostrils.

Delbert laughed. "Sure thing. Old wolf has really got them going."

Jake looked up sourly. "What are they singing?" He reached out to take the pipe from Delbert.

Delbert chuckled again. "Hexes," he said. "Trying to make that devil go away. We said they couldn't hunt him, so now they trying to hex him away. That one voice is old Starfall. She's a

smart old gal. Most as old as old Moonsong there. She's old Bearbait's grandmother, ain't she, 'Bait?" An answering rumble came from the great hulk of the warden slumped at his feet. Delbert rubbed his bare feet across the warden's shoulders. Jake relapsed into silence.

And under a bush a few klicks east, Willow sat listening to the song, her blood roiled with conflicting emotions. The wolf was sitting a few meters away in the shadow of another bush. His attention was focused entirely on Willow; from time to time he would shift his position and whine ingratiatingly. Willow panted slightly.

She had felt the wolf as a presence before he came seeking her. The impurity she was conceived to be under mandated loneliness; with nothing to do but avoid her own kind, she wandered aimlessly through the forest, hunting desultorily and fretting. She felt useless, and ashamed, and full of vain longings. She thought over all the ritual she knew to see if she might have omitted anything. Thoughts of various males kept drifting in upon her, shaming her further. And among them, the voice of the northling....

The night after she left, she listened almost hungrily to the strange voice, still hovering just beyond comprehension. It echoed in her ears; she scarcely noticed her grandmother's denunciations ringing down the breeze.

She spent the next day idling along the run, playing and splashing in the water, startling the fish. She caught and ate a few mice in a meadow, lazed away the afternoon lolling on a flat rock by the stream. In the last light she caught a 'possum and carried it back to the bank to eat it. She had just finished it when the wolf came seeking her.

She ran, of course. He had appeared quite suddenly, stopped on catching sight of her, then started toward her wagging his tail. She leaped up and backed away, then turned tail and fled. He pursued her at a short distance, not drawing too close, but trying to persuade her of his sincerity. Willow was dumbfounded by the situation. His speech was incomprehensible, his appearance half-savage, half-demon, his intentions unmistakable, and utterly tabu. Willow's people had no legend of an incubus to victimize helpless females, but their understanding of the estrous phenomenon was highly magical in nature. Its suddenness and the completeness of its distraction suggested demonic possession. At the best of times estrus was carefully surrounded with cultural restrictions; unseasonable heats were presumed the result of devilish machinations. To Willow's knowledge this was the first time the demon Sex had appeared in such a concrete form. No dog warden would have pursued a bitch under forbidding, however great the temptation.

Her initial panic dissipated, Willow

paused defensively, her back to a tree. The stranger approached cautiously, playfully. His gestures of courtship and deference were crude parodies of the delicate and sophisticated rituals of the wardens, but they had a certain power of their own. With a sudden frenzy of snapping and snarling, she drove him back again and fled down the path. The wolf came after her.

The sun went down without dimming the wolf's ardor; and so presently Willow found herself under a bush, racked with ambivalence, her grandmother's songs against the wolf ringing in her ears, the awful reality there before her. His presence surrounded her, his scent rank and strange in her nostrils. Every sound seemed magnified. She could hear his heartbeat quite clearly, quick and excited, over the thunder of her own. His voice was urgent, enticing. He seemed almost to be touching her. She whined softly in anxiety and frustration.

The wolf crawled from under his bush. He rolled on his back, whining, playing the youngling. Willow watched him in the dappled moonlight, her ears alert for every sound. The wolf crawled into the open, slightly closer to her. Abruptly stopping his plaintive whining, he rose slowly to his feet. Willow closed her mouth with a snap. The wolf went into full display, standing to his greatest height, his mane erect, his tail curled tight and bushy over his back. He took a step toward her. Willow came off the ground, sidled away nervously, out from under the bush and up onto a rock break. She stood facing him, tail between her legs, ready to bolt. He advanced stiff-legged, one step at a time, stretching out his nose toward her. His scent rushed upward to her on the light breeze. She felt dizzy, almost lightheaded. She took a step back. He came on steadily, closer and closer, leaning out to her. Putting one foot on the rock, he reached up, and their noses touched. The sound of his sniff was soft in her ear. His nose brushed her cheek, her ruff. His head loomed beside her, his thick mane touched her chin; his scent so familiar, so strange ... she sniffed warily, unable to help herself. And again, his face, his chin ... their whiskers mingled, their noses touched. Her face burned, her belly on fire. He turned slightly, took a step, sniffed again at her neck, her flank. She stood rigid, then turned her head toward him. She was burning up. She could still hear her grandmother's song, but distantly. It seemed strange, irrelevant, unrelated to the living presence beside her. The wolf was more real, more natural. The fire mounted in her loins, and the agonizing, unspecific, seeking desire she had felt for days resolved itself upon the wolf.

"Tell us a story, Moonsong," Delbert said. "Jake wants to hear you tell a story."

Jake sat up in his chair. The old warden lay with her head to the fire,

her chin resting on her paws. She lifted it and answered; Jake caught her drift well enough this time: what story would he hear?

"Any story," said Delbert. "Tell where wardens came from." The other Hawkinses sighed and stirred, orienting themselves toward the warden on the hearth. Delbert eased back in his chair and grinned at Jake. "I'll explain what she's saying so's you can understand it better, Jake."

Then Moonsong spoke, and Jake explained her words thus:

In the beginning there were two brothers, and they were Cur Dog and Savage. They lived in a field by the edge of the woods, and they ate rabbit and woodchuck and 'possum. When the storm blew, they curled up in their earth; and when the brush fire burned, they fled before it; and they hid from the lion and bear and wolverine, for these were stronger and fiercer than they.

One day the Masters came and built Their house in the midst of the field. Around it They fenced and plowed, and the horse and cow and sheep did Their bidding. The cat lazed on Their doorstep, and the chicken pecked in the yard; and when the lion and bear came prowling, the Masters smote them with devices and hung their skins by the door.

Then Cur Dog said to Savage, "Come, let us, too, go to the Masters and seek Their grace. We, too, will lie on Their doorstep, and when the storm blows and the lion roars, we will lie by the fire and chew fat bones and be warm." But Savage feared the Masters and said, "They will surely destroy us even as the lion and bear. But stay, let us wait until night, and sneak up to the house and steal the chicken."

But Cur Dog was resolute. So he went and scratched at the Master's door, and when the Master came, he deferred to Him and begged grace. Then the Master said, "Since you have come, you may lie by the fire and have fat bones to chew. In exchange, you will guard the house and flocks, and warn against savage and lion and bear." So Cur Dog took the bone and lay by the fire, and when Savage came in the night to take chickens, Cur Dog awakened the Masters with his cries, and They smote Savage with Their devices so that he fled crying back to the woods. And ever after there was enmity between Cur Dog and Savage.

Then the Masters were many and rich. They built the stone places and lived there in great numbers. In Their wisdom They rose higher and higher, and went to live among the moon and stars. Then there were few Masters left on Earth, and without Them the sons of Cur Dog could not tend all the flocks. So the wards strayed and met accidents, and the sons of Savage ate many. Then the Masters took the flesh of Cur Dog, and from it they made the Warden. They said:

"We have made you stronger and wiser than any cur dog. With your

kind you will guard the flocks even against lion and bear. You may eat those that fall by the way; but at the appointed time you will bring the flocks in so We may count the increase and select the best among them. Then We will see how well you have done Our bidding.

"As a token We will give you fire. If you tend it loyally, it will warm your camp; but if you let it die, only a Master can light it again for you. Let it be a reminder to you of Our grace."

So the Warden took the fire and did the Master's bidding, and so it has been ever since. But the Masters grew ever fewer — and though, by merit and loyalty of our ancestors, Sugar Hill still receives grace — for many tribes, no Masters attend when they bring the flocks at the appointed time. Still, we guard the flocks and their increase, for we know the Masters live among the moon and stars. Someday They will return to judge us at the appointed time; and when They see how the flocks have increased, They will know how well we have done Their bidding.

Here Moonsong stopped speaking, and the room sat silent but for the crackle of the fire.

"You reckon they ever will come back?" Rida said presently.

Delbert shook himself and stretched. "Bound to someday. They're still up there. See them fly over sometimes, way up high." He rose and went to pour himself some more cider from the jug mulling on the hearth.

Ace grunted. "Why should they? What've we got for them? Shit, they don't even know we're down here. They left us the wardens to look after us and took off. They ain't comin' back. I don't blame them. Shit, wish I could follow them." He swigged sourly at his cider.

Jake sat for a moment, then said, "So what about the wolf?"

Delbert laughed. "What about the wolf, Moonsong?"

The wolf (Moonsong explained) is a demon from the north, where no Masters or wardens dwell. It is a creature of wind and ice; it forbodes the winter storm. It mocks the wardens' loyalty and means death to the wards. It is a shadow on our dreams. We must drive it out.

Jake thought of wolves. "Nah," he said. "A wolf is just like a coyote, but bigger and smarter. It ain't no wind and ice, just flesh and blood. It can freeze or starve in the winter, too. I ought to know, I seen them dead in the bad winters."

We cannot have it here, said Moonsong. It bodes the going of the Masters. The Northmaster said he was the last Master in the North. Now he has left, and the demon has followed him. It is ill, it bodes only ill.

The old warden was visibly disturbed, and the other wardens in the room had become restive. Jake desisted from his argument.

"The winters keep getting worse,

and that's the plain truth," said old Mr. Hawkins.

For three days Willow gave herself to love, and ranged at the wolf's side. They moved to the north and east, well away from Sugar Hill range, or any warden. Together they hunted, and slept, and made love. They romped and played in the fall fields, startling the deer. Their world was each other, and they gave no thought to the rest. For the wolf it was no hard task; he had sought and won a handsome bitch, and his interest in the wardens, no longer so academic, was centered on her. The investigation of the other wardens could wait. Willow for her part had cast off all civilized restraints. If in the back of her mind she knew she must pay for this joy, the fire in her blood did not permit her to dwell on the matter. She was utterly consumed with love. The wolf was her only reality, and her grandmother's exorcisms in the distance seemed the height of irrelevance. For two nights they did not trouble themselves to reply to the evensong.

On the first day of Willow's love, Grabchuck, Quailflusher, and his mate, White Rabbit, had gone seeking her. They searched for several kilometers outrange, and found several markers, both Willow's and the wolf's; but these were many hours old, and told nothing but that Willow was still in heat, and the wolf had been eating deer, which they knew. The couple had already withdrawn from the area, and the three found no evidence of their meeting, nor indeed any marker less than sixteen hours old. Still, it was clear that the wolf had been in the same area, and Willow's absence was itself a suspicious circumstance. The cousins were greatly disquieted when they returned to camp.

Their grandmother was even more disquieted when they made their report. The wolf's failure to respond the night before had sparked a hope that the exorcism might be taking effect. Now, instead, it seemed he might be up to even greater mischief. Starfall took care the word was spread, and redoubled her efforts at evensong, inserting a personal call to Willow to respond and tell her whereabouts. In the distance Willow heard the message and ignored it; the wolf, uncomprehending, did likewise. Starfall became persuaded the demon had compassed Willow's disappearance. Her instinctive horror of the northling was confirmed, and the desperate anguish of her lament stirred every warden in the valley.

On Sugar Hill the house wardens paced restlessly or went off to confer in the camps. The humans, too, were disturbed; even Jake could feel the tension in the song. Delbert explained the new anxiety: Jake scoffed, but the others turned uneasy glances on him, and he withdrew into silence. The songs continued unusually long. At last they were still, and the humans found unquiet sleep.

In the night it rained, and the drizzle continued into the morning. Before dawn search parties set out, but the scent, already cold, was well laid by the rain, and they did not find it. Willow, hearing their signals, led the wolf to the west, confusing the trail as she went. By midday the rain had died down; most of the searchers had given up and returned to camp. Only a few continued to search, Quailflusher and Grabchuck among them. Late in the day they picked up a few markers where the lovers had been. By then it had grown dark, but the cousins perservered, and began casting toward the west.

The sky had cleared, and the moon rose almost full. Many wardens had gathered at Starfall's camp, and the entire valley waited upon her voice. Presently she came forth and, mounting a lofty rock, began to sing in a voice of pain. Woe upon us, she cried, woe has come upon us. We have strayed from the way, we have neglected ritual and duty. A path was opened: a devil has come from the north. She sang the devil, she sang storm and wind and ice, till all the valley joined in the cry of dread. Then, shifting suddenly, she entered a plaintive mode, a parent's lament for a lost child. She sang Willow's beauty and virtue, and the curse laid upon her by devils. She sang the grief and anxiety of kinfolk longing for a child's return, and the wickedness of a demon that would work evil on a lost and lonely maiden. Hopelessly pleading, she cried Willow's name: if she could hear, if she yet lived, answer now, only answer!

And Willow answered.

She and the wolf lay some kilometers to the north. In the early evening they had pulled down a lame stag, and feasted to repletion. In the bright moonlight Willow's joy had seemed complete, and she and the wolf lay side by side, grooming and caressing each other. Now the grief of her kinfolk reached out to her, and in that moment she felt she must explain, allay their fears, tell them of her joy.

She sang of her love and her happiness. She sang the beauty and nobility of the wolf, and her joy in his company. And he, understanding not her words but her tone, joined his voice to hers in splendid harmony, a duet of wilderness and love and freedom. Before all the valley they declared themselves in clear song.

For a moment there was stunned silence. A few voices rose — startled, angry, inquiring — to be cut off by Starfall's clear, high quaver. Witchcraft! she cried. The demon has bewitched her! And she began a well-known exorcism, in which other voices gradually joined, from one range to another, until the whole valley rang with it.

On Sugar Hill, Delbert turned from his window and looked whither Jake sat in shadow. "Well, your wolf's done it now," he commented. The other Hawkinses stared at Jake.

Jake shifted nervously. "*My* wolf?" He glanced around, feeling the weight of more than a score of looks. "What's he done?"

Delbert sank down on the bench with a sigh. His uncle, Old Earl, passed him a full beaker. "It's kind of hard to explain." Delbert sipped at the cider. "You heard them two voices answer old Starfall just now?"

"Yeah," said Jake. "One was the wolf."

"The other was a little bitch warden named Willow. Looks like they're, uh, you know, gettin' it on." Delbert appeared somewhat embarrassed, glanced apologetically toward Moonsong.

"What's wrong with that?" Jake stared around defiantly. "Wolves are right close to dogs. Wild dogs breed with wolves up north. Run with the same pack sometimes."

A growl rose from several throats, and a young warden started to his feet. "Easy, there! Down!" Delbert quieted the wardens. A couple of the humans chuckled.

"Well, now," said Delbert testily, "firstly, these ain't no cur dogs. Wardens are proud. They don't mix their blood with no cur dogs. No wolves, neither.

"Secondly, bitch wardens don't generally come in heat this time of year. When they do, they reckon it's the evil spirits or something, and they s'posed to go off alone till they're out again. Ain't no dog warden s'posed to go near them till then. But this wolf — 'course they reckon he's a devil, anyway. But now he's gone and led that Willow astray — and her Starfall's own granddaughter, ain't she, Bearbait? Your cousin, ain't she?" An answering rumble. "So the wardens are mad as hell." He sat back judiciously.

"Well now, wait a minute. How's the wolf s'posed to know that?" Jake felt that the currents were running against him; but the role of wolf's advocate seemed to be his. "It gets lonely traveling. How's he s'posed to know?"

Moonsong's voice rose from her place by the fire. She spoke at some length; Jake could not follow it. Delbert translated, "They reckon it was witchcraft. They can't have no breeding with no devil. She says that wolf has got to go."

"It ain't no devil!" Jake insisted. "It's just a critter, like a warden or a sheep or something. If you stick him, he bleeds."

Delbert shrugged. "I don't know about that. All I know is what the wardens think, and it ain't no use arguing with them."

There was a pause.

"Nice weather we been having for hunting," Little Earl observed thoughtfully.

"Be different from foxes," added his brother Billy.

"Oh, shit." Jake got up suddenly, dumping a cat complaining on the floor, and walked outside. For some time he stood staring at the moon, listening to the night sounds. The war-

dens were still now. The moonlight flooded the hilltop. He scuffed his feet in the leaves and thought of the lover's song. He remembered the girl, and that last spring up north, when she was just pregnant, when she and Jake and the old man had lived in the lakeside cabin ... and he cursed and kicked among the leaves. The breeze freshened, and he shook himself. Presently he went back inside. The conversation was on another matter. He filled his pipe and took himself back to his armchair.

Quailflusher and Grabchuck pelted through the night in the direction whence Willow's voice had come. Only they had continued so long. They had finally cut the couple's trail shortly before the singing began, and their grandmother's voice had impelled them along it. They were checked and casting about in a rocky patch when Willow answered; at once they were off again. Within minutes they had picked up the scent, and loped easily over the countryside. The moon gave more than enough light, and their noses led them surely. They did not give tongue, but followed the trail in silence. It seemed to grow fresher by the meter.

Her people's rejection of her love shocked Willow into a moment of lucidity. The wolf, the dead stag, the moonlit clearing seemed suddenly foreign, dreamlike. She rose and walked about, fretfully testing the air. The wolf, sensing her anxiety, approached her solicitously. They exchanged sniffs. His manner was affectionate, reassuring. He was real indeed. Her blood stirred again. The wolf licked her face; she responded in kind. He nipped at her playfully and danced, inviting her to wrestle. Tempted, she took a step, then stopped again, uneasy. In the distance the songs of her people still sounded. The breeze stirred about them, bringing scents of the night, cool and damp, the small rustling sounds ... something ... she turned, tested the air again. The breeze was shifty ... there. Home-smell. Someone was coming. Not many, but fast, running. The wolf had caught it now, too; he bristled slightly, paced nervously, took up a stand before the dead stag.

"No!" Willow growled softly. "Leave it! We've got to go!" She edged toward the north side of the clearing. The wolf would not heed her. The moonlight fell full upon him, standing to his greatest height, his mane erect, his eyes gleaming, a fearsome sight. She could not leave him.

Running feet sounded loud now: the scent grew rank, and Quailflusher and Grabchuck burst into the clearing. With a roar the wolf charged. Grabchuck was bowled over by his rush; Quail was seized by the throat and thrown before he could collect himself. Quail fought desperately: a moment later, Grabchuck rejoined the fray, and the issue stood in doubt. The wolf let go of Quailflusher, knocked Grab-

chuck over again, then gave a prodigious leap to land three meters away, in full aggressive display. He had nothing of warden language, but they understood him clearly. Leave us alone, he said.

Quail and Grabchuck had not expected to plunge directly into combat. They were intimidated. "Willow!" Quailflusher barked, all his hair on end. "Willow! Where are you? Are you here?" He began sliding to the right, still facing the wolf, ready to meet a fresh attack.

Willow unfroze suddenly. "Here!" she cried. "Stop! Don't fight him!" She darted forward to stand by the wolf, shouldering him, then pushing in front of him. "Don't fight him! You don't understand!"

The two wardens backed up a pace or two. "What are you doing here, running with the devil like this? What are you thinking of?" Grabchuck's voice was sharp in the sudden quiet.

"He's not a devil!" she cried passionately. "He's wild and beautiful! Grandmother is wrong! Quailflusher, my uncle, you always loved me and watched out for me ever since I was a puppy tumbling at your feet, can't you understand? Don't you know what I feel? I can't leave him!"

"Willow, Willow, it's your blood speaking, not you! Look at him, look at him! He's no warden! He's monstrous! Like a huge savage, but ferocious and dangerous! Didn't you see how he attacked us? He's dangerous!"

"You attacked us, you came to take me away! He fought for me, as my own mate should! See, you challenge him still! Why can't you leave us alone? Why can't all of you leave us alone? Every night the songs, and no one understands, not even you, Quailflusher!"

Quailflusher withdrew another step. "You are bewitched, Willow. You don't know what you're saying. Listen to me, listen to your people calling you! Shake off this spell the demon has cast on you. Leave him, come back with us!"

Willow stopped. In the distance the great chorus still rang. She shook herself. A great wave of bitterness rose in her. "No. You're wrong. You don't understand. I can't leave him, I won't. He is wild and strange and beautiful, but he's no devil. Who should know better? You don't know him. Grandmother knows nothing of him. He is my mate." She sat down. The wolf, puzzled by the incomprehensible discussion, nuzzled her ear. She lay down. The wolf stood over her protectively, facing the two wardens.

"Is this your last word?" Quailflusher demanded.

"I will stay with him," Willow repeated.

"We'll tell Grandmother what you have said," Quailflusher said with dignity. He turned carefully and strode from the clearing, breaking into a trot as he reentered the sheltering trees. Grabchuck followed.

* * *

The sun was well up and the Hawkinses had breakfasted the next morning when a delegation of leading wardens approached the front porch of the house. Bearbait went out and conferred with them, then came inside and spoke briefly with Delbert. The family waited expectantly.

"Well," said Delbert. He glanced at Jake, then looked at his father. "They want to talk to us," he said. " 'Bout the wolf." He looked at Jake again. Jake looked elsewhere.

"Yeah," Big John said. "Well, looks like we better talk to them, then." He rose slowly and started out to the front door. The others followed. Delbert paused a moment.

"Jake? You coming?"

Jake stirred. "Yeah. I reckon." He got up and followed.

On the front porch they assembled, old Mr. Hawkins and Big John in front. Jake pushed toward them; the others made room for him. Several house wardens, Bearbait and Moonsong among them, took up positions around the family. A good dozen wardens sat waiting, several of them visibly grizzled with age. An extremely elderly bitch warden sat slightly before the others.

"Delbert?" old Mr. Hawkins invited. Delbert stepped forward, hunkered down a meter or two from the old warden.

"Yo, old Starfall," he said. She came forward, sniffed his hand, panted briefly as he rumpled her ears and rubbed her neck. He spoke to her in warden talk, softly, soothingly. She nudged his hand, then sat back formally and addressed the humans.

The family stirred; Big John glanced at Big Earl, then at Jake. Delbert spoke, translating.

"It's what I said last night, Jake. The wolf done run off with that Willow. Couple of these young wardens" — he indicated two younger wardens among the delegation — "tracked them and found them last night. Say the wolf attacked them. And that Willow wouldn't leave it. They figure it's bewitched her proper. Anyways, they want to hunt it down." He stopped, scanned the assembly.

The humans stirred. Big John looked at Jake, cleared his throat. The younger men were muttering, openly eager. Jake sighed.

"Why?" he demanded. "You-all just want to hunt the wolf. You know he ain't bewitched nothing. That Willow's in heat. She'll get over it in a couple days and come on home, same as any ... I mean, you-all just looking for an excuse." He looked the wardens over; they were all on their feet, glaring, some with hackles raised. Only old Starfall remained sitting at attention. "You wardens," he said. "That wolf ain't no kind of devil. I seen plenty of wolves up north. They're just a critter, like anything else. No different from a big coyote, 'cept maybe a little smarter. He ain't done nothing to you. What are you so scared of?"

Starfall spoke, slowly. The humans listened. Presently Delbert translated: "All ill comes from the north. Even the Northmaster has fled from it, with the news that no Masters live there now. Such creatures as this have never been in the valley before, and now they come, following the Northmaster. What will be the end of it? This year there have been many portents. Stock has been lost; wardens have been cursed, some to death. There have been many fall heats. Now the last Master is gone from the north, and the north has come to us. Shall we stand by and let this happen? Can we let our youth be seduced? What then? What when it raids our flocks, like a savage? Shall we forbear, until this house stands empty, no roof to keep out the snow, like the others in the valley? We have our faith to keep. We will protect what we have, until the Masters come again from the sky. You say the devil is only a big savage. Well, we have killed many savages. We will kill this one, too." She was silent, and sat with dignity, watching the humans. Jake bit his lip, cursed under his breath. The Hawkinses muttered among themselves.

"All right!" Little Earl broke out. "Let's do it! What the hell?"

Ace sniffed the fall air, fresh and clear after the previous day's rain. "Right good weather for it," he commented. There was a general murmur of assent among the men.

"Yeah," Big John said. "No offense to you, Jake, but I can't see no reason not to hunt it. The wardens want to. I guess it ain't done no damage so far, but who knows what it might do? If it's just a critter like you say, why not?" He, too, looked around, breathed deeply. "It's a real good day for hunting." All eyes now turned to Jake.

Jake sighed, shrugged. "Do what you want," he said. "I don't reckon it matters much. Plenty more wolves where that one came from." He shrugged again, turned and went back in the house. Voices rose excitedly behind him.

Willow and the wolf had stayed by the kill until morning. Willow was still deeply disturbed by the encounter, and the wolf appeared restless. In the broad light of morning they moved off to the west. In a meadow they browsed desultorily for field mice; the wolf was an adept mouser, but this morning his eye was out, and he missed easy catches. Presently they made love again: the act did not consume her as before, and she realized that her heat was waning. They lay in the sun for some time, but Willow could not rest. Her family's attitude fretted her. Sometime after noon she urged the wolf protesting to his feet and headed westward again. If they could get well outrange, the tribe might leave them alone. She mused, thought of a den, of young born in the dead of winter, of the wolf's protection, his skill in hunting. It all seemed unreal.

She found herself impatient with the wolf, who lagged behind, reluctant, panting in the midday warmth. After a time she consented to stop and rest again, but she continued nervous, starting at odd sounds. The wolf slept, twitching an ear occasionally. Presently she dozed.

In her sleep she hunted. The scent of a savage came clearly to her nostrils; she was running over the countryside, the air crisp and clear. Behind her the clan was running; she gave tongue and heard them answer, hot and eager, strangely distant. Farther back she heard the Huntsman's horn blat ... still the scent. She ran harder, the pack far behind now. She felt fear ... the horn blatted again, distant, too distant....

The horn! Of a sudden she was fully awake, on her feet, listening desperately. Yes, there. The horn, and then a hunt call ... Bearbait's voice! How many times she had thrilled to it, followed it in the field! The wolf stood now, listening in the same direction. He looked at her inquiringly. Another hunt call sounded, slightly closer. She shook herself in the early-evening chill. Four or five klicks off. Coming toward them ... in a flash it was clear. Horrified, she looked at the wolf.

"Run!" she cried, anguished for the first time at his inability to understand her speech. "We've got to run! We've got to lose them!" She shouldered him furiously, then broke for the western edge of the clearing. Looking back, she barked again at the wolf. Suddenly catching her fear, he started toward her, and in a moment they were flying through the covert. A run appeared, and Willow splashed into it. Her hunt training operated in reverse; and she doubled back into it again, the wolf after her, and splashed upstream a klick or more before breaking out across a meadow that offered open running.

Behind her she heard the hunt calls again. The wolf quickened his pace, pushed out ahead of her. They darted into a thick covert. Willow floundered briefly in a tangle of thorn, then wrenched herself free and followed the wolf again as he wriggled through a fox run and burst from the other side of the covert. Open meadows stretched some distance; they ran harder, Willow scarcely noticing the smarts where the thorns had slashed her. The horn sounded again; they had lost time in the covert.

At the crest of a hill they paused, panting. The last purple rays were fading ahead of them; overhead the first stars winked, and a vast and ruddy moon loomed on the horizon. Distantly the hunt calls sounded with a new eagerness; the hunters ... the clan! Her own folk! Her revered Masters, come hunting her! ... had the fresher scent now, and their voices lifted again and again. A sudden triumphant bugling told her they had found the spot where she and the wolf had lain only a little earlier. Her heart leaped in her breast, and she fled with the wolf close beside,

fear and horror and grief driving all but flight from her mind. They skirted another covert, plunged downhill into another run. In an instant she turned downstream, and they splashed on frantically for quite some distance and knew that the first run had delayed them. A few minutes gained ... on she ran, the wolf beside her still, stretching into a ground-eating lope. The calls behind informed her as the pack cast about up and down the first run, found the scent again, and came on. It was eerie, horrible to flee from the sound she had followed so often. She racked her brain for the tricks that foxes and savages had used to evade the hunt in the past, doubling back, confusing the trail. The wolf had no experience of this form of hunt, and his clumsiness hampered her. Again and again he stopped, faced back growling, obliging her to urge him on. Anger was overcoming his fear: the wardens were outside their territory. How dare they attack him here, in no-wolf's-land? But they were many, and Willow urged him on. He ran.

The second creek stopped them for less time, and Willow knew from the calls that they were closing the distance. The pack had come too close while they slept. She remembered her nervous urge to move on — if only they had kept moving, farther on, out of warden range, too far to pursue — the breath came quick in her throat now. Up hill, down hollow. The night was a blur. The Huntsman's horn blatted, less than three klicks behind now. She heard a horse whinny.

A dense hedge of rose ran across the meadow, opposing them. They ran along it, found a low gap, wriggled through, sustaining more scratches as they went. And up the next hill. The moon was well up now, and as she crested the hill she looked back. At the same instant a full-throated bellow gave the view halloo, and the pack was in full cry, the night ringing with fierce gladness. The wolf nipped her angrily, and she fled again with a whine. Down hollow, up hill. The pack poured over the hill behind them. She could distinguish individual voices easily, Bear-bait and Fisher, bold Lion's-meat, clear-voiced Larksong of the Meadows and deep-chested Bull from the Greenwood sib, and there, there — her throat twisted — there the voice of Quailflusher, her uncle who loved her, and of Grabchuck, her little cousin she tumbled about with as a pup, even they! Her step faltered; a stone turned under her foot. The wolf was ahead of her, lashing up the hill. A massive oak loomed at the top, standing alone, its dead leaves still clinging to the bough casting a deep shadow over the hillside in the moonlight. Beneath it the wolf halted, faced back as Willow came up, rage in his voice as he bayed sudden answer to his persecutors.

"No!" Willow cried. "Don't stop! Run!" He snarled at her, then threw back his head and let his voice ring defiance. The moon struck through the

branches, dappling his immense mane with silver. Willow dithered for a moment, wanting to run, unable to persuade the wolf. She murmured in his ear, sniffed his mane. For a moment he softened; his whiskers brushed her cheek. Then the hunt field came over the last crest. The pack roared down in the hollow; the wolf was all attention again. Willow stood beside him.

The first forms appeared in the moonlight, lunging up the slope. The wolf filled his lungs and roared, a sound that seemed to stop the night. The leading wardens stumbled; the ones behind fell over them. For a moment there was confusion as the pack sorted itself out not ten meters from them, halted by the wolf's rage. Two or three voices took up the cry again, to be silenced by another bellow from the wolf. He took a pace forward, and another. Some of the wardens fell back, leaving one clearly in the fore. Bearbait, Willow saw. The knowledge seemed meaningless. The wolf took another step, and charged with a roar. Bearbait charged quickly to meet him, and they crashed together, their jaws seeking purchase. A moment the pack wavered; then with a cry Bull plunged forward to lock his teeth in the wolf's flank, then Fisher, and the pack fell on the wolf.

With a wild cry Willow plunged into the melee, throwing her kinsmen aside, her jaws slashing at whomever stood in her way. Her vision turned red; she smelled only rage and pain. Beneath the heaving bodies she sought and found the familiar smell of the wolf, mixed now with blood. Jaws closed on her, slashed her flank. A voice cried "Willow!" With berserk fury she flung her kinsmen aside, penetrating to the bottom, to the wolf. Someone had his teeth in the wolf's throat. Willow slashed at the attacker's head, sank her teeth in his shoulder, sought a grip on his throat. Someone else slashed her hind leg. She gripped loose skin and shook with all her strength.

Of a sudden the noise was less. A horn sounded near at hand. A lash fell suddenly, stinging across her and her opponent alike. With a yelp he released his hold on the wolf and jumped away. For a moment she was dragged. Then she let go and stood. The wolf lay still. She stepped, sniffed at him. His throat was torn open, his blood soaked the hillside from a hundred gashes. She stood over him and turned to face the pack. The Masters were there on Their horses, whipping in. The Huntsman sat His horse three meters off, whip in hand, watching her. She looked at her kinfolk milling in confusion. A dam broke within. She threw back her head and cried out grief without words, older than her race, greater than the world. The hunters were still. The wardens sat rapt; the Masters, even the horses stock-still as she wept. She did not stop, could not stop. For endless time her voice rose, sound beyond song.

At last she sank down, the death-

song dying out in sobs. She licked the wolf's head, his mane, tasting his blood, her breath breaking in little sobs still. There was movement at a distance: dimly she understood that the hunt was drawing off, riders and wardens going off slowly down the hill. Her grief welled up again and burst forth in a new cry. The others were leaving. Her voice cried death to all the valley. She cared not. She grieved. Presently she was alone.

All night she wept, her voice ringging out again and again as grief warred with exhaustion. In the small hours she sank down at last, not into sleep but into a stunned, spent apathy. She lay with her head on the wolf's, knowing nothing.

Much later she became aware of motion. She lifted her head slowly. The night had waned. Faint light spread from the east, showing an unfamiliar Master a short distance away. He crouched, looking at her. She growled feebly. He murmured softly, then whined in a manner remarkably like the wolf's. She stared at Him blankly. He moved again, extended a hand in her direction. There was only death in her nostrils. Her head sank again. The wolf was dead. His corpse was stiff beneath her. The Master was a little closer, still murmuring, making wolf-sounds. She did not know Him. A horse stamped nearby. She did not care.

The hand was in front of her nose now; involuntarily she sniffed. She did not know Him. Softly the Master crooned to her. He touched the wolf's shoulder. She growled, without spirit. The wolf was dead. She would not leave him.

The Master touched her; with a quick movement she caught His cuff in her teeth. He was still, talking to her in a soft voice. He did not speak warden. She understood a little of His talk now, but it meant nothing. She let go of His cuff. He stroked her head, speaking softly. She lay still.

The strange Master rose slowly. "Willow," He said. "Willow."

She looked up without lifting her head.

"Come, Willow," He said, in Master-talk. "We got to go now."

"I will not leave him." She spoke for the first time, not caring if He understood her.

"I know," He said. "We'll bring him. Come."

She rose slowly, looked at the Master. "Who are You?"

Again He seemed to understand. He spoke His name, unpronounceable Master-talk. Then He said, "Them other wardens call me Northmaster, and Wolfmaster. They say I brought the wolf." She stared at Him. Wolfmaster. Northmaster. He knelt beside her, ran His hand over the dead wolf's fur. "Come on. We'll bury him, we two."

Bury him. The thought wakened a longing for ritual in her heart. They would bury him. Ritual. She stepped aside; the Wolfmaster gathered up her lover and walked heavily to the pony.

It shied from the smell, afraid both of death and wolf, but steadied at His word. He draped the wolf behind the saddle, lashed it in place, mounted. She followed Him.

Snow was drifted before the door of the stone house. Jake heard John Hawkins stamping it from his feet beneath the overhang before he knocked. He opened, and Hawkins stepped inside quickly, a breath of cold around him.

"You O.K., Jake?"

"No problem, John. Plenty of firewood. Plenty of meat froze. Just thaw it out by the fire there when we need it." He smiled. Hawkins looked uneasy.

"Well, we worried a little, 'count of the storm. Knowing you was over here alone and all. You sure you don't want to come back over to the big house?"

"No, that's O.K., John. I'm used to being alone. We're O.K. here. I don't reckon them wardens want to see me too much. And I know they don't want to see Willow. 'Specially now." He grinned faintly.

"How's that?" Big John looked about for the warden.

"There." Jake pointed with his chin to the fireplace. Willow lay in a mound of sheepskin, only her head showing. "Look there." He walked over, hunkered by her and rubbed her forehead. John peered over his shoulder. "Look." Jake pulled the sheepskins aside. Two puppies nestled among the wool, close by Willow's side.

"Be damned," Big John said. "Be damned."

Just a couple of nights ago."

"I didn't, I mean, I didn't know if it'd work out," Big John said. "Wolf and a warden, I mean, never heard of ... didn't know if she'd have them all right. Look all right, don't they?"

"Yeah." Jake thumped Willow's ribs lightly, pulled the sheepskins back over them. "Don't know what they'll look like."

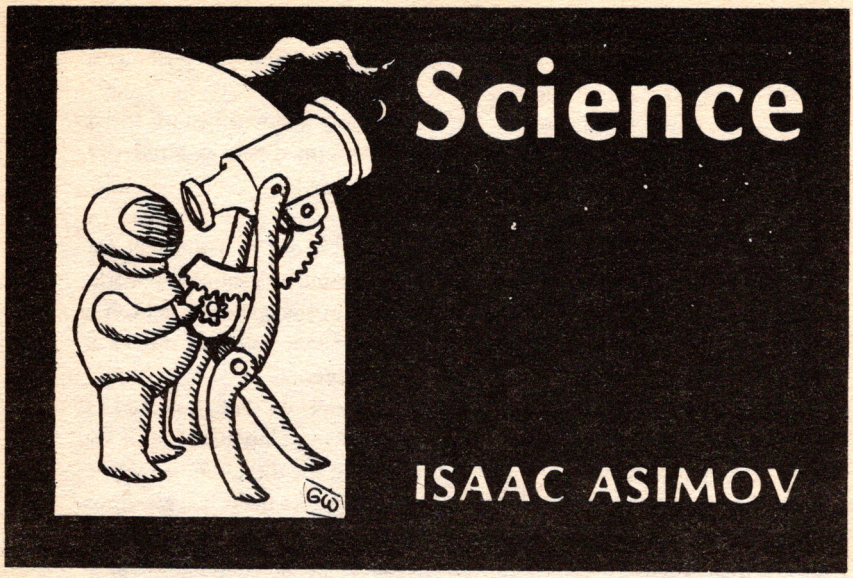
"Be damned," Big John said again.

"We'll be all right," Jake said.

ANSWER TO MAY ACROSTIC

Quotation: She served her people by giving them relief from pain and sickness. Also, she enriched them by allowing them to spread word of her abilities to neighboring people. She was an oracle. A woman through whom a god spoke. Strangers paid heavily for her services.

Author and work: Octavia E. Butler, WILD SEED.



THE TWO MASSES

I saw Albert Einstein once.

It was on April 10, 1935. I was returning from an interview at Columbia College, an interview on which my permission to enter depended. (It was disastrous, for I was a totally unimpressive 15-year-old, and I didn't get in.)

I stopped off in a museum to recover, for I had no illusions as to my chances after that interview, and so confused and upset was I that I've never been able to remember which museum it was. But wandering in a semi-dazed condition through the rooms, I saw Albert Einstein, and wasn't so dead to the world around me that I didn't recognize him at once.

From then on, for half an hour, I followed him patiently from room to room, looking at nothing else, merely staring at him. I wasn't alone; there were others doing the same. No one said a word; no one approached him for an autograph or for any other purpose; everyone merely stared. Einstein paid no attention whatever; I assume he was used to it.

After all, no other scientist, except for Isaac Newton, was so revered in his own lifetime — even by other great scientists, let alone by laymen and adolescents. It is not only that his accomplishments were enormous, but

that they are in some respects almost too rarefied to describe, especially in connection with what is generally accepted as his greatest accomplishment: General Relativity.

Certainly it's too rarefied for me, since I am only a biochemist (of sorts) and not a theoretical physicist, but in my self-assumed role as busybody know-it-all, I suppose I have to try anyway—

In 1905, Einstein had advanced his Special Theory of Relativity (or Special Relativity for short), which is the more familiar part of his work. Special Relativity begins with the assumption that the speed of light in a vacuum will always be measured at the same constant value regardless of the speed of the light source relative to the observer.

From that, an inescapable line of deduction tells us that the speed of light represents the limiting speed for anything in our Universe; that if we observe a moving object, we will find its length in the direction of motion and the rate of time passage upon it decreased and its mass increased, as compared with what it would be if the objects were at rest. These properties vary with speed in a fixed manner such that at the speed of light, length and time rate would be measured as zero; while mass would be infinite. Furthermore, Special Relativity tells us that energy and mass are related according to the now famous equation, $e = mc^2$.

Suppose, though, that the speed of light in a vacuum is *not* unchanging under all conditions. In that case, none of the deductions are valid. How, then, can we decide on this matter of the constancy of the speed of light?

To be sure, the Michelson-Morley experiment (see THE LIGHT THAT FAILED, June 1963) had indicated that the speed of light did not change with the motion of the Earth; that is, that it was the same whether the light moved in the direction of Earth's revolution about the Sun or at right angles to it. One might extrapolate the general principle from that, but the Michelson-Morley experiment is capable of other interpretations. (To go to an extreme, it might indicate that the Earth wasn't moving, and that Copernicus was wrong.)

In any case, Einstein insisted later that he had not heard of the Michelson-Morley experiment at the time he conceived of Special Relativity and that it seemed to him that light's speed must be constant simply because he found himself involved in contradictions if that weren't so.

Actually, the best way to test Einstein's assumption would be to test whether the deductions from that assumption are to be observed in the real

Universe. If so, then we are driven to the conclusion that the basic assumption must be true for we would then know of no other way of explaining the truth of the deductions. (The deductions do *not* follow from the earlier Newtonian view of the Universe or from any other non-Einsteinian — or non-relativistic — view.)

It would have been extremely difficult to test Special Relativity if the state of physical knowledge were what it had been in 1895, ten years before Einstein advanced his theory. The startling changes it predicted in the case of length, mass and time with speed are perceptible only at great speeds, far beyond those encountered in ordinary life.

By a stroke of fortune, however, the world of subatomic particles had opened up in the decade prior to Einstein's announcements. These particles moved at speeds of 15,000 kilometres per second and more, and at *those* speeds relativistic effects are appreciable.

It turned out that the deductions of Special Relativity were all there; all of them; not only qualitatively, but quantitatively as well. Not only did an electron gain mass as it sped by at nine-tenths the speed of light, but its mass was multiplied by 3 1/6 times, just as the theory predicted.

Special Relativity has been tested an incredible number of times in the last eight decades and it has passed every test. The huge particle accelerators built since World War II would not work if they didn't take into account relativistic effects in precisely the manner required by Einstein's equations. Without the $e = mc^2$ equation, there is no explaining the energy effects of subatomic interactions, the working of nuclear power plants, the shining of the Sun.

Consequently, no physicist who is even minimally sane doubts the validity of Special Relativity.

This is not to say that Special Relativity necessarily represents ultimate truth. It is quite possible that a broader theory may someday be advanced to explain everything Special Relativity does and more besides. On the other hand, nothing has so far arisen that seems to require such explanation except for the reported *apparent* separation of quasar components at more than the speed of light, and the betting is that this is probably an optical illusion that can be explained within the limits of Special Relativity.

Then, too, even if such a broader theory is developed, it would have to work its way down to Special Relativity within the bounds of present-day experimentation, just as Special Relativity works itself down to ordinary Newtonian laws of motion, if you stick to the low speeds we use in everyday life.

Why is Special Relativity called "Special"? Because it deals with the

special case of constant motion. Special Relativity tells you all you need to know if you are dealing with an object moving at constant speed and unchanging direction with respect of yourself.

But what if the speed or direction of movement of an object (or both) is changing with respect to you? In that case, Special Relativity is insufficient.

Strictly speaking, motion is never constant. There are always present forces that introduce changes in speed, direction, or both, in the case of every moving object. Consequently, we might argue that Special Relativity is always insufficient.

So it is, but the insufficiency can be small enough to ignore. Subatomic particles moving at vast speeds over short distances don't have time to accelerate much and Special Relativity can be applied.

In the Universe generally, however, where stars and planets are involved, Special Relativity is grossly insufficient, for there we deal with large accelerations, and these are invariably brought about by the existence of vast and ever-present gravitational fields.

At the subatomic level, gravitation is so excessively weak in comparison with other forces, that it can be ignored. At the macroscopic level of visible objects, however, it cannot be ignored; in fact, everything *but* gravitation can be ignored.

Near Earth's surface, a falling body speeds up while a rising body slows down; and both are examples of accelerations caused entirely by progress through Earth's gravitational field. The Moon travels in an orbit about the Earth, the Earth about the Sun, the Sun about the Galactic center, the Galaxy about the Local Group center and so on, and in every case the orbital motion involves an acceleration since there is a continuing change in the direction of motion. Such accelerations are also produced in response to gravitational fields.

Einstein therefore set about applying his relativistic notions to the case of motion *generally*, accelerated as well as constant, in other words, all the real motions in the Universe. When worked out, this would be the General Theory of Relativity, or General Relativity. To do this, he had, first and foremost, to consider gravitation.

There is a puzzle about gravitation that dates back to Newton. According to Newton's mathematical formulations of the laws governing the way in which objects moved, the strength of the gravitational pull depends

upon mass. The Earth pulls on an object with a mass of 2 kilograms exactly twice as hard as it does on an object with a mass of only 1 kilogram. Furthermore, if Earth doubled its own mass, it would pull on everything exactly twice as hard as it does now. We can, therefore, measure the mass of the Earth by measuring the intensity of its gravitational pull upon a given object; or we can measure the mass of an object by measuring the force exerted upon it by Earth.

A mass, so determined, is "gravitational mass."

Newton, however, also worked out the laws of motion and maintained that any force exerted upon an object causes that object to undergo an acceleration. The amount of acceleration is in inverse proportion to the mass of the object. In other words, if the same force is exerted on two objects, one which has a mass of 2 kilograms and the other of 1 kilogram, the 2-kilogram object will be accelerated to exactly half the extent of the 1-kilogram object.

The resistance to acceleration is called "inertia," and we can say that the larger the mass of an object, the larger its inertia (that is, the less it will accelerate under the push of a given force). We can, therefore, measure the mass of a body by measuring its inertia; that is, by measuring the acceleration produced upon it by a given force.

A mass, so determined, is "inertial mass."

All masses that have ever been determined have been measured either through gravitational effects or inertial effects. Either is taken as valid and they are treated as interchangeable, even though the two masses have no *apparent* connection. Might there not, after all, be some objects, made of certain materials, or held under certain conditions, that would show an intense gravitational field but very little inertia, or vice versa? Why not?

Yet whenever one measures the mass of a body gravitationally, then measures the mass of the same body inertially, the two measurements come out to be equal. Yet that may only be appearance. There may be small differences, too small to be noted ordinarily.

In 1909, an important experiment in this connection was performed by a Hungarian physicist, Roland, Baron von Eötvös (the name is pronounced "oit'voish").

What he did was to suspend a horizontal bar from a delicate fiber. At one end of the bar was a ball of one material and at the other end a ball of another material. The Sun pulls on both balls and forces an acceleration on each. If the balls are of different mass, say 2 kilograms and 1 kilogram, then the 2-kilogram mass has twice the inertia of the 1-kilogram mass. For that

reason, the 2-kilogram mass accelerates only half as much per kilogram and ends up being made to accelerate only as strongly as the 1-kilogram mass is.

If inertial mass and gravitational mass are *exactly* equal, then the two balls are made to accelerate *exactly* equally, and the horizontal bar may be pulled toward the Sun by an immeasurable amount, but it does not rotate. If the inertial mass and gravitational mass are not quite equal, then one ball will accelerate a bit more than the other, and the bar will experience a slight turning force. This will twist the fiber, which, to a certain extent, resists twisting and will only twist so far in response to a given force. From the extent of the twist, one can therefore calculate the amount of difference between the inertial mass and the gravitational mass.

The fiber used was a very thin one so that its resistence to twist was very low and yet the horizontal bar showed no measurable turn. Eötvös could calculate that a difference in the two masses of 1 part in 200,000,000 would have produced a measurable twist, so the two masses were identical in amount to within that extent.

(Since then, still more delicate versions of the Eötvös experiment have been carried through and we are now certain by direct observation that inertial mass and gravitational mass are identical in quantity to within 1 part in 1,000,000,000,000.)

Einstein, in working out General Relativity, began by assuming that inertial mass and gravitational mass are *exactly* equal because they are, in essence, *the same thing.* This is called "the principal of equivalence" and it plays the same role in General Relativity that the constancy of the speed of light plays in Special Relativity.

It was possible, even before Einstein, to see that inertially produced acceleration can bring about the same effects as gravitation. Any of us can experience it.

If, for instance, you are in an elevator which starts downward, gaining speed at the start, then during that period of acceleration, the floor of the elevator drops out from under you, so to speak, so that you press upon it with less force. You feel your weight decrease as though you were lifting upward. The downward acceleration is equivalent to a lessening of the gravitational pull.

Of course, once the elevator reaches a particular speed and maintains it, there is no longer any acceleration and you feel your normal weight. If the elevator is moving at a constant speed of any amount and in any constant direction, you feel no gravitational effect whatever. In fact, if you are travelling through a vacuum in a totally enclosed box so that you don't see

scenery moving, or feel the vibration of air resistance, or hear the whistling of wind, there is absolutely no way in which you can tell such constant motion from any other (at a different speed or in a different direction) or from being at rest. That is one of the basics of Special Relativity.

It is because Earth travels through a vacuum at nearly constant speed and in a nearly constant direction (over short distances) that it is so difficult for people to differentiate the situation from that of Earth being at rest.

On the other hand, if the elevator kept on accelerating downward and moving faster and faster, you would feel your weight to have decreased permanently. If the elevator accelerated downward at a great enough rate, if it fell at the natural acceleration that the gravitational pull would impose upon it ("free fall") then all sensation of weight would vanish. You would float.

If the elevator accelerated downward at a rate faster than that associated with free fall, you would feel the equivalent of a gravitational pull *upward*, and you would find the ceiling fulfilling the functions of a floor to you.

Naturally, you can't expect an elevator to accelerate downward for very long. For one thing, you would need an extraordinarily long shaft within which it might continue moving downward, one that would be light-years long if you want to carry matters to extremes. Then, too, even if you had such an impossibly long shaft, a constant rate of acceleration would soon cause the speed to become a respectable fraction of that of light. That would introduce appreciable relativistic effects and complicate matters.

We can, however, imagine another situation. If an object is in orbit about the Earth, it is, in effect, constantly falling toward the Earth at an acceleration imposed upon it by Earth's gravitational pull. However, it is also moving horizontally relative to the Earth's surface, and since the Earth is spherical, that surface curves away from the falling object. Hence, the object is always falling, but never reaches the surface. It keeps on falling and falling for billions of years, perhaps. It is in perpetual free fall.

Thus, a spaceship that is in coasting orbit about the Earth is held in that orbit by Earth's gravitational pull, but anything on the spaceship falls *with* the spaceship and experiences zero gravity, just as though it was on a perpetual falling elevator. (Actually, astronauts would feel the gravitational pull of the spacehsip itself and of each other, to say nothing of the pulls of other planets, and distant stars, but these would all be tiny forces that would be entirely imperceptible.) That is why people on orbiting spaceships float freely.

Again, the Earth is in the grip of the Sun's gravitational pull and that keeps it in orbit about the Sun. So is the Moon. The Earth and the Moon perpetually fall toward the Sun together, and being in free fall don't feel the Sun's pull as far as their relationship to each other is concerned.

However, the Earth has a gravitational pull of its own which, while much weaker than the Sun's, is nevertheless quite strong. Therefore, the Moon, in response to Earth's gravitational pull, moves about the Earth just as though the Sun didn't exist. (Actually, since the Moon is a little removed from the Earth, and is sometimes a little closer to the Sun than Earth is, and sometimes a little farther, the Sun's pull is slightly different on the two worlds and this introduces certain minor "tidal effects" which make evident the reality of the Sun's existence.)

Again, we stand on the Earth and feel only the Earth's pull, and not the Sun's at all; since we and the Earth share the free fall with respect to the Sun, and since the tidal effect of the Sun upon ourselves is far too small for us to detect or be conscious of.

Suppose, next, that we were on an elevator accelerating upward. This happens to a minute extent everytime we are on an elevator that moves upward from rest. If it is a speedy elevator, then, when it starts, there is a movement of appreciable acceleration during which the floor moves up toward us and we feel ourselves pressed downward. The acceleration upward produces the sensation of an increased gravitational pull.

Again, the sensation lasts only briefly, for the elevator reaches its maximum speed and then stays there during the course of its trip until it is time for it to stop, when it goes through a momentary slowing and you feel the sensation of a decreased gravitational pull. While the elevator is at maximum speed, and neither speeding up nor slowing down, you would feel perfectly normal.

Well, then, suppose you were in an elevator shaft light-years long and there was an enclosed elevator that could accelerate smoothly upward through a vacuum for an indefinite period, going faster and faster and faster. You would feel an increased gravitational pull indefinitely. (Astronauts feel this for a period of time when a rocket accelerates upward and they are pressed downward uncomfortably. Indeed, there is a limit to how intense an acceleration can be allowed or the additional sensation of gravitational pull can become great enough to press astronauts to death.)

But suppose there is no Earth — just an elevator accelerating upward. If the rate of acceleration was at an appropriate level, you would feel the equivalent of a gravitational pull just like that on Earth's surface. You

would walk about perfectly comfortably and could imagine the elevator to be resting motionless on Earth's surface.

Here is where Einstein made his great leap of imagination. By supposing that inertial mass and gravitational mass were identical, he also supposed that there was no way — *no way* — in which you could tell whether you were in an enclosed cubicle moving upward at a steady acceleration of 9.8 metres per second, or were in the same enclosed cubicle at rest on the surface of the Earth.

This means that anything that would happen in the accelerating cubicle must also happen at rest on the surface of the Earth.

This is easy to see as far as the falling of ordinary bodies is concerned. An object held out at arm's length in an accelerating cubicle would drop when released and seem to fall at a constantly accelerating rate because the floor of the cubicle would be moving up to meet it at a constantly accelerating rate.

Therefore, an object held on Earth would also fall in the same way. This doesn't mean that the Earth is accelerating upward toward the object. It just means that gravitational pull produces an effect indistinguishable from that of upward acceleration.

Einstein, however, insisted that this included *everything*. If a beam of light were sent horizontally across the upward-accelerating elevator, the elevator would be a little higher when the beam of light finished its journey. The beam of light would therefore seem to curve downward as it crossed the cubicle. Light travels so rapidly, to be sure, that in the time it takes for it to cross the cubicle, it would have moved downward only imperceptibly — but it would curve just the same. There is no question about that.

Therefore, said Einstein, a beam of light subjected to Earth's gravitational field (or *any* gravitational field) must also travel a curved path. The more intense the gravitational field and the longer the path travelled by the light beam, the more noticeable the curve. This is an example of a deduction that can be drawn from the Principle of Equivalence that could not be drawn from earlier theories of the structure of the Universe. All the deductions put together make up General Relativity.

Other deductions include the suggestion that light should take a bit longer to travel from A to B when subjected to a gravitational field, because it follows a curved path; that light loses energy when moving against the pull of a gravitational field and therefore shows a red shift, and so on.

Again, by considering all the deductions, it makes sense to consider space-time to be curved. Everything follows the curve so that gravitational effects are due to the geometry of space-time rather than to a "pull."

It is possible to work up a simple analogy of gravitational effects by imagining an indefinitely large sheet made up of infinitely-stretchable rubber extending high above the surface of the Earth. The weight of any mass resting on that sheet pushes down the rubber at that point and creates a "gravity well." The greater the mass and the more compressed it is, the deeper the well and the steeper the sides. An object rolling across the sheet may skim one edge of the gravity well, sinking down the shallow rim of the well and out again. In this way it will be forced to follow a curved path just as though it had suffered a gravitational pull.

If the rolling object should happen to follow a path that would take it deeper into the well, it might be trapped and made to follow a slanting elliptical path about the walls of the well. If there is friction between the moving object and the walls, the orbit will decay and the object will eventually fall into the greater object at the bottom of the well.

All in all, making use of General Relativity, Einstein was able to set up certain "field equations" that applied to the Universe as a whole. Those field equations founded the science of cosmology (the study of the properties of the Universe as a whole).

Einstein announced General Relativity in 1916, and the next question is whether it could be verified by observation as Special Relativity had been soon after its announcement eleven years earlier.

There is a catch. While both Special and General Relativity predicted effects that differed from the older Newtonian view by so little as to be all but indetectable, the fortuitous discovery of subatomic phenomena made it possible to study very pronounced versions of Special Relativistic effects.

General Relativity had no such luck. For half a century after Einstein had suggested it, there were only very tiny effects that could be relied on to distinguish General Relativity from the earlier Newtonian treatment.

Such observations as could be made tended to be favorable to General Relativity, but were not overwhelmingly favorable. General Relativity therefore remained a matter of dispute for a long time (but *not* Special Relativity, which is a settled matter).

What's more, because Einstein's version was not strongly borne out, other scientists tried to work out alternate mathematical formulations based upon the Principle of Equivalence, so that there were a number

of different General Relativities.

Of all the different General Relativities, Einstein's happened to be the simplest and the one that could be expressed most neatly in mathematical equations. It was the most "elegant."

Elegance is powerfully attractive to mathematicians and scientists but it is no absolute guarantee of truth. It was therefore necessary to find tests (if possible) that would not only distinguish Einstein's General Relativity from Newton's view of the Universe, but from all the competing General Relativities.

We'll take that up next month.

CORRECTION

Gentle Readers, in ARM OF THE GIANT (December 1983), I accused Jupiter of having a diameter of 3000 seconds of arc. I was wrong; Jupiter is innocent. Its diameter is at most 50 seconds of arc. The trouble is that somehow I got my thoughts tangled, thought of it as 50 *minutes* of arc and multiplied by 60 to get seconds. If I had stopped to think for even an instant, I would have realized that I had made Jupiter considerably larger, in appearance, than our Moon. My apologies.

Wayne Wightman ("Condemned, A Kiss, and Sleep," December 1982) offers a powerful sf tale about aliens in human shells ...

The Skin Disguise

BY

WAYNE WIGHTMAN

Arik Jaturin stood beside the green-lily-filled river and wondered if he would be dissected this week or next — and how much pain they would make him feel as the scalpel slid through his tissues. His eyes followed the winding river across the barren plain, up to a darkened niche in the faraway mountains where trees covered the moist land. Overhead, in the sky, the black angular shapes of flying reptiles drifted through updrafts as they scanned the plain for carrion. Arik Jaturin envied them. They would not come near humans. They did not think and wonder why they were what they were. They would not be cut open and explored.

He turned and headed back along the gravel path to the hotel. He had thought, when he began his vacation, that he would be among strangers and would be left alone — but on the same shuttle was a familiar face: Adienne Astarius, a woman with whom he was unacquainted but who had recently been transferred to his division at Raymex. He was in Information Distribution, she was in Efficiency. And wherever he had gone during the week he had been on this vacation world, he had seen her nearby, covertly watching him. Thus, he knew that the internal security apparatus was interested in him, and he knew that when their suspicions were aroused, they did not indulge in lengthy investigations. This week or next, he would be apprehended — there was nowhere to hide — he would be given drugs and questioned, and then he would be cut into pieces, the less-necessary parts being excised first, until they came to the heart of his heart. They wanted to be sure that they would recognize his type of alien if it were ever met again.

Jaturin stopped and looked up at the sky. Brittle-winged reptiles, so high they were only flecks, drifted in lazy circles. He liked watching them — they were brainless and beautiful, graceful and free of the earth, at home in the air.

Jaturin continued along the path toward the hotel, the gravel crunching underfoot. Already he could hear laughter and splashing noises from the swimming pools. He envied how easily human beings could be entertained. Through the willows he now saw the rising face of the hotel and the metal-railed balconies of the rooms. On the eighth floor, near his room, he recognized the ever-present Adienne Astarius, tall, slender, dark-haired. She looked away from him.

"Good-morning, Mr. Jaturin," a high-pitched man's voice said. "Can I give you a lift?"

Jaturin turned — it was Mr. Korski, the hospitality director of the eighth floor. He was in a two-seat floater, on his way back to the hotel.

"Thanks, no. I like the walk."

"Lovely place, isn't it? I never get tired of it." He stepped out of the floater and picked up a wadded piece of paper a tourist had thrown away. Korski was a blunt-bodied little man. He moved awkwardly, throwing his arms away from his body when he stepped one way or the other. As Korski climbed back into the floater, Jaturin noticed that he wore a thickened sole on his left shoe. Like most humans, he was slightly deformed. "I saw you watching the pterodactyls," Korski jabbered. "Nasty things when you get up close to them. They've got ugly eyes and they usually have this crust of food droppings on their necks. Every other day we throw out some meat so the guests can get a better look at them." He was scratching the back of one hand with the other. "Anything I can get you, you let me know, O.K.?"

"I will," Jaturin said. He wanted to get away from the hospitality director — the little man looked as uncomfortable in his stubby body as Jaturin was in his own. "I won't be asking for much," Jaturin said, trying to sound conclusive. "I work with a lot of people, so while I'm here I'll be spending most of my time alone."

"I understand, I understand," Korski said, nodding his head exaggeratedly. "You come from Rahzvan, don't you? That's a great place, real modern, lots of conveniences. Real cosmopolitan, but it's too fast a pace for me. Awfully crowded."

Jaturin forced a smile. "A person gets used to it." But he never did and never would. Past Korski's head, he could see the woman on the balcony watching him carefully, her dark hair hanging at the sides of her face. Jaturin was wanting to get out of his humanoid simulacrum very badly — if he could just break away from Korski, who was staring expectantly at him. "I was just on my way back to lie down for a while. I think the change of at-

mosphere has made me drowsy."

"It'll do that," Korski said, revving the floater a little. "Well, let me know if you need anything."

"I certainly will, Mr. Korski. I'll definitely do that." Jaturin had no plans to ever call on Korski for anything — something about the fidgeting stubby little man made Jaturin uncomfortable almost to the point of aching.

Trying not to look hurried, Jaturin strolled away, past the splashing tourists in the pool. The air was filled with the smell of chlorinated water and suntan oil. Secretaries and corporation directors handled each other and giggled and drank and placed their glasses around the edge of the pool like colored decorations. They looked pale and soft to Jaturin. He tried to appear casual as he entered the hotel through the air curtain.

The lobby smelled still and musty, as though nothing ever thoroughly dried out. He nodded and smiled at the girl behind the desk. She had undoubtedly been chosen for the position on the basis of her good looks and poise, but through Jaturin's eyes, she was peculiar-looking at best, and at worst, she was bloated, puffy, and more than anything else, she was uncomfortable-looking, standing erect and balancing on two legs.

Jaturin entered the up-grav tube and floated slowly toward the eighth floor. At the fourth floor, a woman entered the tube and floated beside him. He did not look at her directly and didn't recognize her until she turned and faced him.

Adienne Astarius looked a little like the girl behind the desk. As nearly as he could tell, in the weeks he had been aware of her existence, she had no deformities. She smiled pleasantly and swept back a handful of her dark hair. "Have you been out on the plain?" she asked.

He wondered if she enjoyed playing the tourist, asking him tourist questions until the moment she would inform him — perhaps after making some offhanded comment about the pterodactyls — that he was under arrest. Like a human being, she probably enjoyed this kind of torment, that kind of surprise.

"When you're out there," she continued, "the resort looks minuscule. It strikes you how tenuous the human hold on this planet is."

"I might drive out there tomorrow." At any other time in his life, as attractive and pleasant as she was, he would have asked her to go along — but if he was going to be arrested soon, he didn't want to spend the time with his jailer.

"There's a forest of balloon trees about a hundred and fifty kilometers past the first range of hills," she continued. "I heard one of the hospitality directors say that they were going to blossom this week."

"I hadn't heard." They floated past the seventh floor. More than anything he wanted to release himself, to climb

out of his body — if only for a few minutes. Nervousness was making his legs cramp inside his human shell.

"If the winds is right," Adienne said, "we should be able to see the blossoms floating over the resort." Her hair billowed around her face in the reversed gravity.

Jaturin stepped out on the eighth floor. She followed.

"Would you like to go see the forest?" she asked as Jaturin pressed his thumb onto the keypad of his door. She seemed determined to be alone with him. Maybe she wasn't with the security apparatus ... what would be the purpose of all this pretense? If they wanted him, they had him. But security rarely did anything in a straightforward manner. They played games inside their games.

"Could you ask me tomorrow?" he said finally, just wanting to put her off and get inside his room. "I feel a little lightheaded at the moment and I'm not thinking too clearly."

"The change of atmosphere," she said, nodding a little. "I'm in room 807, just down the hall. You can call me this evening, if you decide."

They exchanged final pleasantries, and Jaturin closed and locked the door behind him. His room smelled even mustier than the hallway. He pulled the drapes closed and told the autovox to hold any calls and to tell anyone who came to his door that he was not available. Then, with the lights turned down, the room a blur of dim tans and browns to his human eyes, he undressed and tossed his clothes on the bed.

Once naked, he looked at himself in the full-length mirror, amazed again that this was how others saw him, that this was what others envied. He was tall, well-muscled, dark-haired, and handsome. Women he didn't know would begin conversations with him and want to be friendly. But to his alien eyes, in his alien brain, they were grotesque in the extreme — they were spongy, big-faced grazers who showed their teeth when they were happy, and they had talents for waste and subtle violence. As a human, Jaturin's body was deformed in no way, and women were drawn to him. In no place did his skin curdle into darkened swaths. Yet, to his alien brain, he was excessively thick-limbed, awkward-looking, and soft. Never had he grown accustomed to the outer contours of his disguise. And now, this time, perhaps for the last time, he would have a chance to look at his real self in peace.

He took a final look at his human shell — it was impossible to understand how human beings could think that soft, blood-filled skin; watery eyes; and fingered hands were attractive.

From inside the soft biomechanical body, Jaturin unfastened the closures and opened the flap of skin and muscle at the lower part of the abdomen. What had seemed to be only a thin wrinkle line gaped open just above

his pubic hair, and a long multijointed leg extended itself toward the floor.

He watched the black leg through his human eyes — he was connected by an elastic cable to an auxiliary biomechanical brain in the body's head; it allowed him to see through human eyes and experience the sensations of the body. The auxiliary brain, he had learned from painful experience, also contained somewhere inside it a circuit that kept him from feeling the native murderous rages that were apparently inborn in his species.

A second multijointed leg extended from the human abdomen and tentatively touched the carpeting. A third leg appeared, and then the soft-shelled body emerged, sliding out like a huge black egg from the darkness of the moist body cavity. All eight legs were on the floor now — he flexed them and eased his weight first on one pair and then on another. So rarely could he get out of himself in this way and unfold and use his legs that the movement excited him and made him want to vault across the bed, spring off the walls, and shriek out his excitement in the chittering cries of his native language.

He understood why humans constantly searched for the aliens living among them — he was what they dreamed of when they lay helpless, dreaming of death. His jaws were venomous and edged with shredders, and each footpad concealed a sheathed, needle-sharp claw. Humans were huge-bodied and slow — he was quick and agile. They were soft things that thought in soft ways, and so many of them were deformed that they barely knew what normal was; they sweated and shivered so easily.

Still connected by the thin cable to the sensory apparatus of the human body, he studied himself in the mirror. His black body and meter-long legs were so foreign to his human eyes that he felt disgust begin to rise up in him. Living with humans for so many years had tainted his judgment — and now the bulbous body that had once seemed so elegantly simple now repelled him almost as much as his human self. His human face grimaced at the quick jerking movements he made, at his short, thumblike eyestalks and gleaming wet mandibles.

He considered disconnecting himself — only for a few minutes — so he might once again feel himself, feel the surge of fury and flowing venom that he knew his human brain shortcircuited. But if he did, and if he then thought of Adienne Astarius and the police and their famous dissections, would he be able to stay in his room? Or would he open his door, race down the corridor, snap her door off its hinges and bury his dripping jaws in her surprised face, chew into her deceiving lips, shred her lying throat...? Some part of his human and alien mind was revolted that he would have such thoughts.

Jaturin-the-alien circled his human

body and then circled back. He marveled, this time as all the times before, that he lived in two bodies and that *this* — eight solid legs and a cartilaginous shell — this was what he looked like.

He had not always known that he was not human. One day, by accident, as he stood in a shower soaping himself, he discovered that if he held himself just so and moved something inside himself, then the closure would open and he, his real self, could emerge.

At first there was horror that he was not who he thought he was — but then there was exaltation: it provided the explanation for why he had always felt the way he did, why he did not often feel quite the same as those he worked with. And then, finally, the worst thing, when he had time to think, was that although his human body was without defect, his alien part was damaged.

Wherever the memories were in his brain that could tell him who he was, why he was among humans, and what he was supposed to do, wherever those memories were, he could not find them. Something somewhere had gone wrong. Something was damaged. There were parts missing.

He knew that he had been chosen to live with these soft animals; he knew there was a mission; but nothing else could be remembered. Nothing else.

He often wondered if there would come a time when he would be retrieved and sent home. Home, he thought. He chittered softly. Probably his home was a silk-webbed hole in the ground.

And now he suspected he was under surveillance.

As he stood before the mirror, meditatively flexing his limbs, it occurred to him that although he did not think he would mind dying so terribly, he did not want to go quietly. He didn't want to be dragged out of "Arik Jaturin," fastened to a table, and smiled over. He would disconnect his human restraints, unsheathe his claws, and his venom would flow.... He would not give the wide-faces the pleasure of his death.

The door chime sounded. Jaturin lifted the abdominal flap with one hook and began quickly concealing himself. He heard the autovox explaining that he was unavailable and asking if there was a message. And again the door chime sounded.

"Mr. Jaturin?" It was Korski. "I have some magazines you might want to look at while you're lying down. There're some good stories in them. Mr. Jaturin?" The autovox repeated its message.

Finally, Jaturin had himself fastened inside his skin. He pulled the bedspread off the bed, wrapped it around him, squinted his eyes to look sleepy, and opened the door.

"Oh, I didn't think you'd be asleep so fast," the lame man said, rocking from one foot to the other. "I had these

and I thought you might like to look at them." He held forth a small stack of magazines. "This one is the new floater catalog. And this is our resort magazine, *Tropics*." He grinned obsequiously. "It'll tell you all the good sights to see."

"Thanks so much," Jaturin said.

"And one of these" — he shuffled awkwardly through them — "this one has photos and profiles of our after-dinner hostesses. I was just passing them out to people on my floor. Well." He reached out to shake hands. "I hope you have a nice nap."

Jaturin took his hand, forced a smile, and nodded. "I hope I do, too," he said, closing the door. He dropped the magazines on the floor. They hit with a splat. His hands itched — he wondered if Korski had given him some kind of fungal infection, so he went to the bathroom and washed them.

He paced uneasily around his room. The painting over the bed was of an oppressively festive scene of brightly dressed humans around a swimming pool. The carpet under his feet was spongy — spongy like human flesh. The entire room began to repel him — it was like the nesting place of an unfamiliar species.

Several minutes later, leaning over his balcony, he decided to rent a floater and head out to the plain. From where he stood he could see its unblemished yellow surface between the trees. He couldn't see the notch in the mountains where the green-lily-filled river originated, but he decided he would go in that direction. It would be an hour and a half before the sun set, and it would get him away from Korski's pestering and the eyes of Adienne Astarius, who at the moment was probably lurking somewhere, waiting for him to emerge from his room.

The girl at the desk was quite helpful and very pleasant. She accepted his credit card, ran it through the sensor, and the instant the green light came on, she handed him the key and pointed to a side exit.

"Right over there, Mr. Jaturin. The floater is fully charged and is due back in twenty-four hours. Have a nice drive." She smile pleasantly. Jaturin had noticed that she had an artificial tongue — it was not quite the right color, and the girl pronounced certain words too carefully; like most humans, she had to be modified to be socially acceptable. The surgeons had done a nice job on her.

He eased the floater along the path that led down to the river, waiting patiently for pedestrians crossing in front of him and smiling politely at returning drivers who still had the thrill of a fast drive traced on their faces. He let the machine drift slowly across the river as he looked down into the water. Fish leaped and slapped the surface, while deeper beneath him, great dark shapes moved vaguely along the bottom.

Once he got to the edge of the plain, he aimed the floater toward the

notch in the mountains and pushed the stick full forward. The wind hissed around the cowling. He set the autopilot and leaned back. Now he could be away from them all — away from everyone — he could be alone now, perhaps for the last time.

There was little scenery to admire — the dry lake bed stretched a hundred kilometers in all directions. The river winding through it was the only interruption in its monotony. Overhead in the reddening sunlight, the angular drifting reptiles lazily turned in broad circles ... how he envied them.

He wondered how long it would be before he was finally apprehended. Tomorrow? The next day? Conceivably, he could be wrong about Adienne being a security agent, but he doubted it — considering the way she watched him. He knew what it was like to be watched by women who were attracted to him: those women were more obvious. They smiled if he looked directly back at them, and they did not watch him from such a distance. Adienne was being far too careful.

But where they did decide to take him, he would not go quietly. He would disconnect his human thinking. He would let them see the alien they were after. He would let them experience his alien rage....

After twenty minutes, he could distinguish the outlines of the separate foothills at the base of the range of mountains. Behind their rolling humps, rugged tree-covered peaks jutted several thousand meters into the sky, and farther back into the range, mountaintops were blanketed with snow.

The communicator on the dashboard beeped. He touched the white blinking stud and said, "Jaturin."

"Astarius," came the reply. Then, "Look behind you."

He turned, and through the slight distortion of the molded cowling he saw another floater, pacing him, not more than twenty meters away. And inside, Adienne Astarius. She waved.

"You decided to take a drive out here today after all," her voice said through the communicator. "If you want, we can park one of these here and go together." She sounded chatty and casual. And now, even more than before, he was suspicious of unprovoked friendliness. The communicator sounded again: "There are some trees up ahead, just to the right. Why don't you park there?"

He took one last look at the plain, the foothills, the mountains, and the circling reptiles. He knew it could be the last time he saw them.

So she wanted to ride with him and have a little chat. Inside his human body, he touched the abdominal closures, reassuring himself that they would spring open at the slightest nudging.

"I'll stop at the trees," he said. Ten minutes later he pulled the stick back to neutral; the engine whined down, and the hiss of the wind gave way to silence.

Adienne pulled alongside. She had tied her hair behind her head in a dark intricate knot. A few moments later she sat beside him — she wore a perfume that smelled like freshly cut grass; the odor filled the compartment.

"I saw you leaving," she said, "and I thought, 'Why yes, why wait till tomorrow?' and I followed you."

"And now you have me," Jaturin said, wondering how she would respond.

"Were you going into the foothills or were you going to watch the sunset change the color of the plain?" She raised her eyebrows — her face looked utterly open.

He took a measured breath. "I hadn't decided. I just wanted to get out of the resort. The hospitality director of our floor, a Mr. Korski, was making a pest of himself."

"He does that, doesn't he. Well. Let's go into the hills — maybe we can get far enough to see the balloon trees before it's completely dark." She settled into the seat casually enough, but Jaturin saw that she had one hand inside a baggy pants pocket.

He didn't move. "Look," he said, "I know what's going on. I know why you're here. You don't have to pretend with me any longer. Be yourself. I'm going to be *my*self." With two of his unsheathed claws he touched the closures — he didn't release them — but now it would take only a piece of a second to be out and upon her. "Be yourself," he said softly.

"I can't afford the risk of that," she said icily. From her pocket she removed her hand. It held a short-range zeta-shear, one that cut deep, decorative patterns.

Jaturin had not thought he would be frightened when the moment finally arrived, but he was, in short, afraid. His skin chilled and the word *dissection* loomed in his mind.

"Let's go," she said. "Into the mountains. I don't have enough time to earn your trust."

"Give it a try," he said, thinking, *If the z-shear wavers, if she only glances away* — and with his claws poised under the closures, he could feel his venoms begin to flow.

Adienne held the z-shear unwavering on his midsection.

"There is no time for that, there is no time for anything but for you to start this thing up and follow the river into the mountains. If I told you the truth, you'd think I was lying, so what's the point? Start the floater." She nodded down at the z-shear but didn't take her eyes off him. "We don't need to discuss who does what or why. Drive," she said.

Jaturin pushed the stick forward and the floater gradually gained speed. They were in a brushy area with only an occasional tree.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To see the balloon trees," she said, the z-shear still leveled easily at his midsection. She scratched the back of her hand.

"There's been something I've been wanting to know. Do you participate in the dissections?"

"You don't have to worry about that. You aren't going to be dissected if you do what I tell you."

"Sure," he said. "You're my friend. You're trying to help me out. If I don't let you help me out, you slice me up with that thing."

"Pay attention to what you're doing," she directed, "and drive as fast as you can."

Jaturin tried to relax, to wait, until he could once again face her, so when he came out of himself, he could go straight at her. He knew what their destination would be: a shuttle craft that would take him to the surgeons. Tomorrow morning Adienne would be having her breakfast beside the resort pool, marveling at the unique pungency of some local fruits while he, Jaturin, would be remnants. Pretending to be his friend was a stratagem too often used to get the arrested to go along without resistance.

The sun touched the horizon as they were moving through the first peaks. They followed the river, occasionally having to elevate over falls and cataracts. All view of the resort and the plain had been lost behind them in a chaotic jumble of hills and steepening peaks.

"What do you know about me?" he asked, wanting to put her more at ease, hoping that just for a moment she would turn her eyes away from him.

"I know you're an alien," she said. "Occasionally I work for the police — but not at the moment."

"Of course."

"I've done jobs for them once in a while. I had heard about the dissections and thought it was a rumor, something dreamed up by aliens or their sympathizers to sway public opinion. I found out that it is more than rumor. I'm here because I was pick up an alien: you."

"You've done a good job." He slowed the floater and raised its nose to go over a broad, churning waterfall.

"When I got here, I was supposed to be contacted and told whom to bring in — but my contact never happened. Something went wrong in the paper work."

"Then how did you know it was me?"

"Because I have access to certain communications and I recognized your code when it came through. I have a good head for numbers."

"Assuming you are planning to help me, why are we going to the balloon trees?" He didn't want to believe her — trusting a police agent was too dangerous — but now he was feeling an element of doubt.

"Once we get there, you're going to step out of the floater and never come back. Someone will be there to meet you. They'll probably send a team of hunters in after you later, if the proper reports ever get filed, but at least you have this chance."

"Why would you do this? The police don't treat people like you with much affection." He glanced across at her; still, the z-shear was aimed at his midsection, and she watched him carefully.

"You don't need to know anything except that I'm doing you this favor — if you're interrogated, you will inform only on me. And you don't have to believe anything I've told you. I'll just keep this aimed at you, and you do what you're told."

He nodded and kept driving.

The floater skimmed over a placid backwater and then sped up the narrower channel that cut through a forest of tall, spindly trees. Jaturin flipped on the lights. The reflecting eyes of animals glittered in the undergrowth.

"How was I discovered?" he asked.

"Body scanners are set up in certain corridors, and there was a discrepancy in your body mass outside the standard deviation. Your name went to the investigative department, additional checks were made, your apartment examined, and so on. This was your last vacation."

He shook his head minutely.

"How long have you been living with humans?"

"I'm not sure. At least seventeen years." He looked at her face. The fading light had softened her features. She did not look like an enemy. "How many aliens are caught in a month?"

"They don't tell me that, but the number is high. Some people think that some kind of invasion is happening, but so far, from what I've found out, no conspiracies have been uncovered. There are claims that some of you are quite dangerous — but I've not seen any evidence of that. Are you dangerous?"

"How dangerous could I be with a z-shear on me?"

She smiled. "There's a lot that isn't known about this 'alien invasion.' Even after all the interrogations, it isn't known why they're here or where they come from. What puzzles them most is why there are so many different kinds of aliens. I've heard that some aliens don't know what they are until they're arrested and pulled wriggling out of their human simulacra." She was rubbing the back of her hand again. "The balloon trees are just at the end of this canyon."

The river rushing beneath them was as clear as glass, and they could see the splashes of fish jumping at their lights.

"I don't know why I was put with humans," Jaturin said. "I think my memory's damaged. I have an idea that I was put here for some reason, but I don't know what it is. Ever since I discovered what I am, I would have given anything to be a normal, slightly deformed human being."

"The trees are just around the next curve of the river." She pointed. "There."

In the lights of the floater, the white blossoms of the trees glowed as though

they were illuminated from inside. They spread through the narrow valley and up one slope of the surrounding mountains. Every tree was covered with papery white blossoms the size of two hands cupped together. The blossoms shuddered and made raspy noises in the wind of the floater. Jaturin expected to see a shuttle and several black-uniformed police, but there was nothing but trees and blossoms.

"Someone will meet you here in the morning. Then, if plans work out, you'll be picked up in two months and transported off-world. That's all I know."

Jaturin lowered the floater and turned off the power. Only the blue dashlights illuminated their faces.

"So," he said quietly, "you've been telling me the truth."

"Yes." She slipped the zeta-shear back into her pocket.

Jaturin stared at her. He wanted to fix her face in his memory. She was very probably the last real human face he would see for a long time. "You have to hurry back," he said.

"Yes." She reached across and touched a rectangular stud on the dash. Jaturin's door hissed open. He didn't get out. "I'll leave your floater at the edge of the plain. The men in the garage are very careless about who has what machine, when it's coming back, and how far one's been driven. You won't be discovered missing till later tomorrow." She looked down at her empty hands. "I wish we had more time."

"Thank you," Jaturin said, reaching and touching the back of her hand.

"It's what I do," she said. Then something in her bearing changed — she suddenly sat straighter, picked up his hand in her own, and stared at it. She pointed to a small red spot between his knuckles. "What's this?"

"Probably an insect bite." He thought a second. "Korski shook my hand, and it started itching right after that."

She held her right hand beside his. There was a matching red welt below her knuckles.

"Korski," she said through an exhalation. "We were tracked."

In the silence of their breathing, they heard two soft footfalls. Korski's face appeared in the opened hatchway.

"Congratulations," he said with amusement. He was holding a stunner and made sure they saw it. "I was deeply moved by this woman's efforts to save a rathead like yourself, Jaturin. Are you a rathead, Jaturin? Do you have beady pop eyes and little ratclaws for hands?" He didn't wait for a response. "Both of you, out of there. We're going back to my floater."

The ground under Jaturin's feet was spongy with fallen leaves. Around them the blossoms on the trees were ghostly blobs of white.

Korski gestured them back toward his floater. He hobbled when he walked, but he kept the stunner on them all the time. "I have loved this," he said. "I really have — getting to hear the com-

passionate woman win the confidence of the frightened alien. I'll remember it." He laughed. "Let me tell you why it's so goddamned touching: because you're *both* ratheads. I thought it was fun, getting one rathead to lead me to another one."

"You're lying," Adienne said. "I've worked with security for six years. I'm as human as you are."

"And you've been a great aid to the divisions you've worked with. You've led me to five of your kind — but now I'm tired of the joke, and you're going to be interrogated along with this waste of blood."

"This isn't true," Adienne said, her voice still calm but with the slightest edge to it. "Why are you lying to me?"

"Want to be opened up? I'll be glad to do it. I'll do it now — right here." He aimed the stunner at her face. "*Alien*," he hissed.

"Stop!" she said, holding her arms in front of her face. "I'll say I believe you — but I don't." She let her arms drop. "I'm sorry it didn't work," she said to Jaturin. "I'm sorry."

"You're pitiful," Korski said. "Both of you. You've got no nerve. When you're cornered, you lie down and whimper. And one by one, we're going to find all of your kind and dispose of them. I know you think I'm a bad guy, but a race has the right to protect itself."

Jaturin squirmed inside his human body. Every groove and every indentation in the holding cavity was designed to accommodate a specific part of his alien body — and now he was trying to move around in this constricted area just enough to reach the point where the elastic cable plugged into the receptacle at the back of his braincase.

"Bright and early tomorrow, this place will be fried with radiation. Any friends of yours who might be here will be able to pick off their skin in handfuls." Korski's voice went flat and hard-edged. "I can't tell you how much things like you disgust me. I know what you look like. What you *really* look like. People have to *be* aliens to even dream of things like you."

Adienne held Jaturin's hand, but he did not notice. Internally, with one crooked claw, he gripped the cable and tugged. He was ready to slip the closures open, but he couldn't disconnect the cable. It held fast. There wasn't room enough to pull it.

"You," Korski said, "let go of his hand and move over this way. We load up now and go see the doctors."

She dropped his hand, but again Jaturin didn't notice. To Adienne and Korski's eyes, he appeared to be numb, in a state of near collapse. His eyes stared at the ground, and his shoulders had rounded and gone slack. But behind the skin, the hooked claw strained at the cable — it stretched minutely but wouldn't disconnect, wouldn't let go, wouldn't release him from the confining calmness of the auxiliary brain that soothed and rationalized his thinking.

He pulled, he pulled, and then, with a tiny click, it came loose.

Jaturin became himself.

Korski aimed the stunner at his feet and fired. It felt like he'd been clubbed on the ankles with a length of pipe.

"Into the floater," Korski ordered. Under his breath he said, "You aberration."

Jaturin flicked open the closures and paused only the smallest fraction of a second before he emerged, all at once pulling open the abdominal flap, ripping apart the body's clothing, and springing sideways, easily dodging a second discharge of the stunner. His legs moved, full of grace, in a tetrametric rhythm. He sprang over Korski's left shoulder, bounded off the side of the floater, and passed over the man's slow-turning aim. He bounded from one side to the other, nipping him with his extended teeth and slicing shallow gouges in his legs with his claws.

Through his tympanic membrane, Jaturin heard screaming come from beside the floater, and with one of his eyes, as he tormented Korski, he saw Adienne holding her hand to her face, staring down at her stomach as the fabric of her suit shredded open, ripped apart, and revealed what lived within her. The thing slid through the ragged opening and leaped out, dark, brittle-limbed, and, like Jaturin, hungry for Korski.

Jaturin did not think like a human now. He was aware of his jaws and venoms and aware of Korski as a piece of warm despicable meat. Jaturin's jaws nipped at Korski, squirting drops of venom into the wounds that would dissolve the flesh for eating — but Jaturin did not want to feed — not now: he wanted to inflict injury.

Jaturin attacked from the ground, planting his hooks in Korski's back and chest. He sank his mandibles into the deep, soft flesh on the man's sides, beneath his ribs. Adienne fastened herself on Korski's back and shoulders and fixed her jaws over the spinal lumps in his neck.

Korski still held the stunner, but he did not fire it. He had gone rigid, and his eyes were turned up to the dark sky, wide and bulging, as though he thought if he looked hard enough, he might see redemption.

Jaturin immobilized the man's arms and for a fraction of a second looked into those empty human eyes and tried to remember the chill of utter terror. Then he buried his jaws in Korski's chest and pierced his heart with his sucking tongue.

They fed, and among Korski's bowels they found a dark and segmented thing, like the embryo of some growing horror, encapsulated in cartilage.

At sunrise they had finished preening themselves and climbed back into their human bodies, reconnecting the calming auxiliary brains to their own. As the sun touched the top blossoms of the balloon trees, some of the papery globes released themselves and floated

into the air. High over them in the distant sky, flying reptiles glided in the morning updrafts, their long heads turning from side to side, scanning the land for the dead.

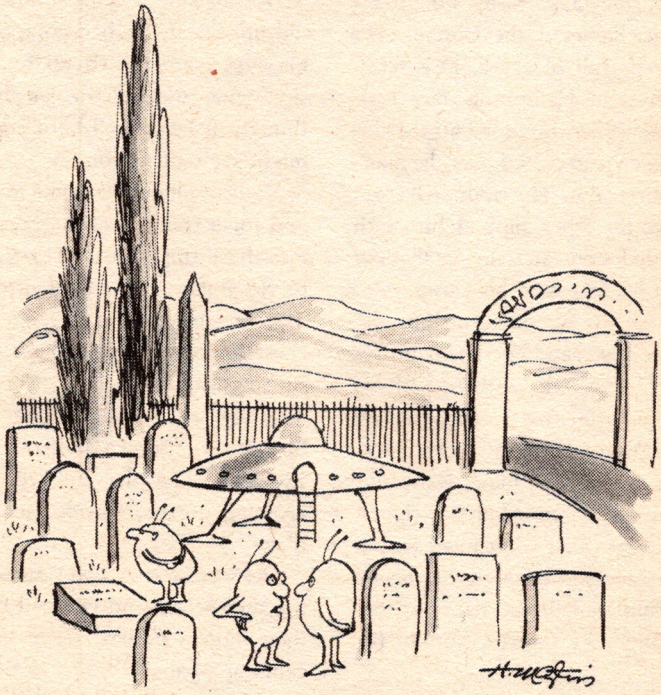
"Someone should meet us soon," Adienne said. "We should set the floaters on autoreturn."

Jaturin watched the blossoms releasing and floating away. He took her hand. "You saved my life. I owe you everything."

"You've already returned the favor."

He took her in his arms. "We're free. For the first time. With no direction, no knowledge of where we came from, we are completely free." He had never noticed how blue her eyes were. He held her closer and put his lips to hers and, like two human beings, they kissed.

The balloon trees rustled and released more blossoms that floated to the highest peaks, where angular reptiles glided and watched the aliens through passionless eyes.



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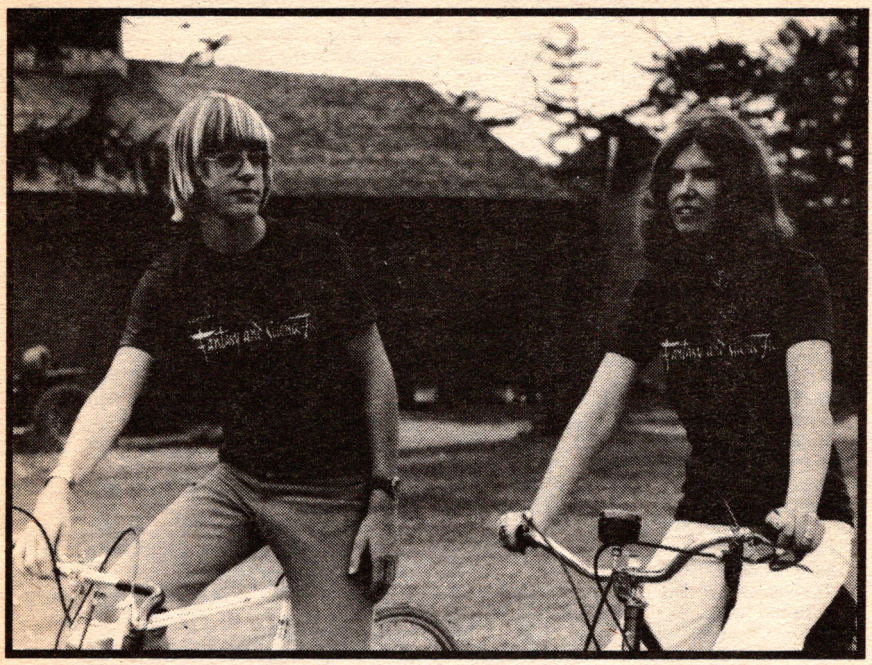

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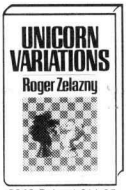

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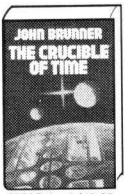

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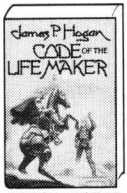

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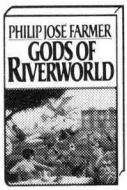

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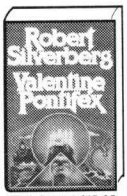

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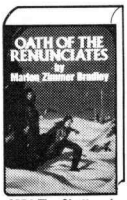

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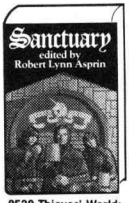

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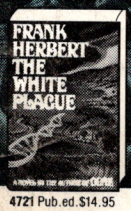

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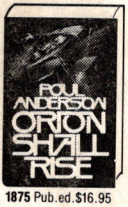

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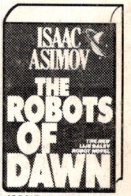

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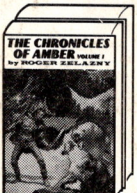

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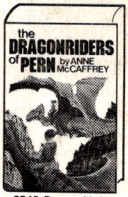

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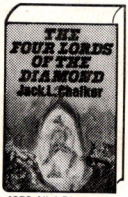

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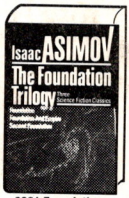

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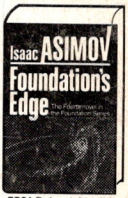

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